

Speak the Truth in Love

A Sermon delivered at the First Parish in Wayland, MA

By John-Eric Robinson

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Here we are, twenty-six days since the attacks of September 11th. It is strange, a congregation member said at our service that evening, that such horrible acts occurred on such a beautiful day here in New England. For this autumn, full of grief as it is, is also full of beauty.

Two weeks ago, nights and days were equal across all latitudes at the fall equinox; now the nights lengthen. We have entered the time of growing darkness, when our hemisphere of the globe prepares for winter. And in this coming darkness, beauty abounds. This past week, the leaves have been turning from summer green to gold, orange, brown, and red. The moon was full last Tuesday, and its bright roundness has lit the sky at nightfall. Yesterday started with wind and rain, and then the sun broke through for yet another gorgeous afternoon.

We give thanks for the beauty of the earth, and for the sweet fields of autumn. Despite our uncertain times in human terms, the earth continues to spin on its axis. The sun rises and sets. The leaves turn, early harvest vegetables grow more scarce at farm stands, pumpkins and squashes abound. Life goes on, even in the wake of death. As the poet William Blake writes, "Joy and woe are woven fine."¹

Joy and woe, beauty and grief. 'Both-and,' not 'either-or.' Life, in its wholeness, is a mixture of opposites and contradictions. Paradox. Ambiguity.

And in all of this mixture, where do affirmative descriptors fit in? In an age critics call postmodern, what is truth? In a time so full of folly, where is love?

While life is indeed paradoxical and ambiguous, paradox and ambiguity are not words to live by. They provide no guidance, only description and explanation.

We humans have incredible creative force. As we live out our lives, we choose, moment by moment, what we lead with out of our tumultuous insides. We all have fear and anger and tenderness and joy inside of us. All of these feelings are human. To feel them is right and good. We are whole in our complexity. And while we feel myriad feelings, we must choose what to do with them all. Out of chaos, we construct order. Out of messes, we seek meaning. Out of our lives, we sew patterns intersecting with one another and with all that is.

Love is a pattern we choose to guide the thread of our lives. Love heals. It provides balm to wounded spirits. All the love we have ever received is present in our minds and bodies as a touchstone in difficult times. The love that we feel for ourselves feeds a fountain that we share with all those around us.

This is why love matters: with love, we build our relationships. With love, we build up ourselves and those around us. With love, we can endure more than we ever could alone. This is the theme of responsive reading 468 in our hymnals, "We Need One Another," which we have read again and again together in this church since the tragedies of that Tuesday morning. I ask you to listen to these words again, just listen this time.

"We need one another when we mourn and would be comforted. We need one another when we are in trouble and afraid. We need one another when we are in despair, in temptation, and need to be recalled to our best selves again. We need one another when we would accomplish some great purpose, and cannot do it alone. We need one another in the hour of success, when we look for someone to share our triumphs. We need one another in the hour of defeat, when with encouragement we might endure, and stand again. We need one another when we come to die, and would have gentle hands prepare us for the journey. All our lives we are in need, and others are in need of us."

We need one another. We help one another. We support one another. This is the meaning of love in the context of healthy community. This is what is meant in the choir's first anthem today: "Love is the spirit of this church."

Love. Here in the gathering of community. In our Unitarian Universalist principles. Our second principle is this: “We, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association, covenant to affirm and promote justice, equity, and compassion in human relationships.” This principle calls us to affirm both justice and compassion. Both truth and love.

If love is a pattern for our lives, truth is the mesh through which we pass the needle. Truth provides the structure, the integrity, the shape of our love. Truth is the foundation of relationship. As poet and essayist Adrienne Rich puts it,

“When someone tells me a piece of truth which has been withheld from me, and which I needed in order to see my life more clearly, it may bring acute pain, but it can also flood me with a cold, sea-sharp wash of relief...”²

Truth alone lacks warmth. Love alone lacks rigor. When the two are balanced, with wisdom as our guide, truthful love is the most powerful force we have.

We need not be Mahatma Gandhi or Mother Theresa to apply this force. We can simply be ourselves, doing the best we can, remembering that others are struggling too. Let us seek to be more truthful, and more loving, than we might otherwise be.

Let me quote a sermon that Ken delivered here back in April of 1996 and that he cites in his recently published book on preaching. In this sermon, entitled “Pain and Religion,” Ken cites his own mentor, Wallace Fiske.

“On his desk,” Ken says, “Wallace kept a hand-lettered copy of words of his own that began, ‘Above all, let us be kind to one another. Nearly everyone we meet is fighting a hard battle. We are all sometimes troubled, anxious, hurting and heavy of heart. Let us be kind to one another and to everyone as far as we can reach.’”³

In this time, and at all times, when spirits are ruffled within and around us, the quality of our gestures and our words and our tone of voice all make a difference. Let our words be gentle. Let us remember that we need one another. Let us open ourselves to both ask for and to receive support and help.

And in these uncertain times, let us remember: Love is the Spirit of this Church. We gather, some of us perhaps for the first time, others for the tenth or the hundredth or the thousandth, to be together in community. This community, with its roots 361 years deep and branches which stretch as wide as our farthest-flung friends and relatives, is our common shelter at this moment.

Love is all around us, as close as breath. It is in the beauty of the earth. It is in sweet autumn fields. It is in the beauty around us and within us. It is here, in this church.

Let us be truthful.

Let us be loving.

Let us speak the truth in love.

Blessed be, and Amen.

¹From the words to one of our hymns, #17 in *Singing the Living Tradition*, “Every Night and Every Morn.”

²Adrienne Rich, “Women and Honor: Some Notes on Lying,” 1975; in the anthology of her writing, *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence: Selected Prose 1966 - 1978* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1979), 193.

³Ken Sawyer and Jane Rzepka, *Thematic Preaching: An Introduction* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2001), 106.