"In That One Word"
A sermon delivered by the Rev. Dr. Stephanie May
at the First Parish in Wayland, MA
April 5, 2015

The tulips today in the front of the church are in honor of my grandmother, Betty Sibley, who died 10 years ago this fall. She would have been 93 this Thursday. She's been on my mind a lot lately as we often spent Easter with her in the annual calendar of dividing major holidays between grandparents. There would be chocolate and an egg hunt as well as a festively laden table of china plates—the *good* dishes. Easter, after all, was the uncontested high point of the year, the pinnacle of the Christian faith into which I had been born. For my staunchly Methodist Grandmother, Easter was the core of the spiritual story which gave her life meaning and moral direction. For Grandma, Jesus' death and resurrection were the necessary sacrifice and triumph to secure our reconciliation to God. And so, each year, we ate our ham and potatoes, peas and jello beside a framed image of Jesus hanging on the dining room wall.

I do think that there was a historical figure named Jesus at the root of the Christian tradition—just as I think there was likely a historical figure behind Abraham in Judaism, Siddhartha Buddha in Buddhism, and the Prophet Muhammad in Islam. I also think it likely that Jesus was indeed crucified by the colonial Roman government. Yet, in contrast to my grandmother, I do not think Jesus was born to violently die as a sacrifice for our sins. Rather, I believe Jesus was a 1st century Jew living in an occupied country full of poverty, hopelessness, and injustice, who believed that the world should be—and could be—a better place. I believe that Jesus spoke out against the religious and political status quo and was killed because of that. Even more specifically, I think he was killed by those who feared the hope that he instilled in those who heard him: a hope that the world did not have to be a place of soldiers and violence; a hope that religious expression need not come with a high price tag for temple sacrifices or only through laws administered by a religious elite.

In short, I believe Jesus was a man inspired by a vision of what the world could be—if only love for one's neighbor and love for one's God were followed as the ultimate law of the land. Jesus' vision and the hope he had instilled in others could have died with him. Instead, after his violent death, his followers continued to speak courageously about an alternative vision of life together. They continued to have hope that the ultimate nature and power of the world was one of Love that sought to produce and restore Life. To me, the miracle of Easter is not a bodily resurrection of crucified man, but the tenacity of the hope that lived on in those who shared in Jesus' vision of a new world.

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More than 17 centuries later, a woman of 42 stood at her window and watched as a "a tall, gaunt-looking woman leading a little ragged girl, of five or six years old" moved door-to-door selling matches. From her New York City window, the woman, Lydia Maria Child, found herself wrestling with her contrary desires to help the girl or not. Recounting her internal struggle in her 1842 column of the newspaper she edited, Child writes,

> "I cannot endure this," thought I: "I must buy whatever her basket contains." Then prudence answered, "Where's the use? Don't you meet twenty objects more wretched every day? Where can you stop?"

Even as she opens the door to the girl, down the street Child notices another group of persons clearly in need as well. She again feels torn. Why help one girl and one woman in a world with seemingly unquenchable need?

Child does buy a generous amount of matches from the girl. Yet, she also notes that while she acted out of compassion *this time*, that on most occasions, she must "drive back the generous impulse, because I have not the means to gratify it." For 19th century New York City—like 21st century Boston or Wayland, or 1st century Jerusalem—was full of situations of human misery. Unable to satisfy all the need or mollify all the misery, Child feels not only a sense of pain, but can feel her compassionate self "turning to stone by inches."

What a chilling image—"turning to stone by inches." Yet, I suspect that the image is also one that resonates with many of us. We live in an era not only of 24/7 news cycles, but of multiplying channels of information from digital radio, cable television, and, of course, the Internet. Our view of misery now includes not only what we pass by on our own street, but also includes the view on streets in cities and towns across the globe. Nor is it only *human* misery to which we bear witness, but also the suffering of animals and ecosystems, of a planet struggling with global imbalance. Confronted with so much suffering, we can feel our minds tuning out. We can feel our impulses to generosity start to deaden. We can feel ourselves turning to stone by inches.

We need stories like Easter *because* of these scenes of misery, of destruction, of seeming hopeless suffering and injustice. We need stories like Easter because we need hope that life will be made new. We need stories like Easter that help us to hold fast to a vision of a better world, a more just world, a more *loving* world.

Of course, Easter is not the only religious story that seeks to kindle such hope. On Friday night, the Jewish celebration of Passover began. Through the retelling of the story of Moses leading the Jews out of slavery in Egypt, Jews will be reminded of their hope in the power of God to restore life and freedom. Their hope will be rekindled that slavery and suffering are

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not the final word, but that there is also a path towards a better world—a world flowing with milk and honey.

Holding fast to visions of a better world is not easy. Often we need prophets like Jesus or Moses who will point the way and inspire others to follow. Yet, if we only look for prophets and grand miracles like the resurrection of the dead or the parting of oceans, then we risk missing the everyday miracles of human love that are everywhere restoring the world. I think this is the point Lydia Maria Child is seeking to make.

Faced with a cityscape of human misery, Lydia Maria Child urges her readers to look for "any little sunbeam of love that breaks through this cloud of misery and wrong." To our jaded 21st century ears, such saccharine language may ring empty. Before dismissing her language too quickly however, consider the context of the author and her words. She's writing for the *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, the New York competitor to William Lloyd Garrison's Boston-based anti-slavery paper *The Liberator*.

While Child has helped to make the *Standard* a family-friendly newspaper, it is still a paper deeply entrenched in the politics of abolitionism in the decades before the Civil War. And, she's doing this as a 42-year old woman living in New York City on her own in the mid-19th century. Indeed, beginning with her move to New York two year earlier, she and her husband would live apart for 10 years—notably a separation that followed an extended period of economic insecurity and marital strain. Personally and professionally, Lydia Maria Child is keenly attuned to the reality of suffering in her own life and in others. She is not seeking to "sugar-coat" life with saccharine words, but to find some kind of response that would make a difference in a difficult world.

And in response to suffering and misery, slavery and gender inequality, Lydia Maria Child urges her readers to look for "the sunbeams of love" and to be grateful for "every manifestation of human love." To illustrate such love, she tells stories of people kindly treating animals, which then respond with remarkable training—all without whips or cruelty. She tells another story of human generosity to an impoverished mother and children playing music and singing on the street. With these stories, Child seeks to demonstrate that love *is* present all around us, that love *is* already making the world a kinder, better place. Faced with the reality of need and suffering, she responds by writing,

> "The cure for all the ills and the wrongs, the cares, the sorrows, and the crimes of humanity, all lie in that one word, Love. It is the divine vitality that everywhere produces and restores life. To each and every one of us it gives the power of working miracles, if we will."

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For Lydia Maria Child, *love* is the response we need.

For my 6th grade English class, I had to write a short story. Ever the earnest Midwestern girl, my story was of a young girl rushing home to tell her mother that she had solved all the world's problems. (*I'm not making this up. Yes, this really was my tween idea of a good story.)* The solution, the girl explained, was *Love.* Love would solve poverty by sharing food and resources. Love would solve wars by seeking to avoid harm. Love was all we needed.

As a wiser adolescent and young adult, I would think back to this essay with scornful disdain. Oh, how I didn't understand the complexities of the world. *Sigh*. And now, I am the same age Lydia Maria Child was when she wrote this column on love; both of us middle-aged women who have known and witnessed suffering. Women with enough life experience to know that one person cannot meet all the need in the world. Not even Jesus, not even Moses, Mohammed, or the Buddha. Neither one person, nor one extraordinary miracle can simply "fix" the world.

Rather that wait for one powerful person or one grand miracle, I believe that we need hope in a power that can transform many lives. A power that can be in any and all of us. A power than can go everywhere to produce and restore life. A power that can appear like a sunbeam to cut through the darkness of despair and the fog of hopelessness. I believe that we need the power of Love.

We need a love that can keep our hearts from turning to stone by inches. We need a love that resurrects our weary hearts, our jaded spirits. We need a love that works everyday miracles. Such love is a love that stops to buy the Spare Change newspaper from the homeless person on the street. Such love is a love that shows kindness to the clerk behind the counter or the customer service rep on the phone.

Such love is also the love that speaks out against a status quo that promotes injustice, suffering, and violence. Such love joins the movement against slavery, as Lydia Maria Child did, or joins the movement for marriage equality, as many of you have. Such love speaks out against violence in the name of religion—including the violence of discrimination and exclusion promoted in the guise of religious "freedom." We need a love that seeks to produce and restore human dignity and the fullness of life.

Later this week, on Thursday April 9, we will join with the National Parks and other institutions across the country to ring our bells to mark the 150th anniversary of the surrender of General Lee to General Grant—signaling the beginning of the end of the Civil War. At the time, Lydia Maria Child was living up the road here in Wayland. She had lived to see the beginning and the end of the war and to see the civil freedom and

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enfranchisement of African American men. The path *to* that day was a very bloody one, full of much suffering. And that path *from* that day has been one of continued racial violence and ongoing practices of racial inequality.

Yet, the presence of ongoing suffering and injustice should not be what keeps us from acting with compassion and love. Rather, we are urged to be the miracle of love that opens the door to the little girl selling matches, that writes the letter to the newspaper denouncing a social injustice, and that kindly treats an animal, a neighbor, or a stranger. Within each of us is the power of love. Within each of us is the power to work a miracle, if only we will.

For me, Easter is still the religious high point of the year. At its core, I believe Easter celebrates the hope that sustains us in the face of suffering, of loss, even of death. We need stories like Easter because we need to be reminded of this hope. We need to be reminded of the many everyday miracles that produce and restore life. We need to be reminded that Love can pierce the deepest darkness and bring forth new life.

So may it be.
Alleluia.
Amen.

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