“Love the Hell Out of This World”
A Sermon by Matt Meyer
First Parish in Wayland
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Once upon a time, I was invited to a costume party, hosted by Scott Keuer, the coolest kid in my 5th grade class. I remember 5th grade as the year that I first took notice of the social hierarchy of my class and recognized that some people were at the top of the pyramid and others were closer to the bottom. As someone who was a bit closer to the bottom of the pyramid myself, I was particularly interested in figuring out what landed people in difference places on the hierarchy. Was I near the bottom because I still wore sweat pants every day, when the other kids had taken up jeans? Or because word had gotten out that I wanted to grow up to be a singer like Mariah Carey?

As far as I could tell at the time, the most revered kids who were the best at making fun of other people. Which made the whole system, theologically speaking, a certain kind of hell. Looking back though, the pyramid seems to have been mostly correlated with gender roles and who was the best at performing their part. Girls with fashionable outfits were higher on the pyramid as were boys who were good at boy things, like playing sports or hiding their feelings.

So back to the high stakes costume party. I’d spent weeks deciding whether to go as a clown or an army guy. I went back & forth and back & forth, until the very last second when we were just about to leave for the party and I changed my mind for the last time, threw the clown costume aside and dressed in my army guy outfit.
So when I got to the party, you can only imagine my simultaneous terror and relief, when I realized that it was not actually a costume party. It was an *army* themed party. And at the end of the evening, I won the prize for *best dressed*. To this day, it’s the only time anyone has even considered giving me such an award.

You would think that this small miracle of good fortune would have left me feeling great about myself. But I was actually just as freaked out, knowing that I had escaped such massive embarrassment by the skin of my teeth. I knew that the rules of this game were still not in my favor, even if I’d been momentarily dealt a good hand.
Just the thought of showing up to that party in a clown outfit haunts me to this day, so much so, that I am preaching to you about it this morning.

Fast forward a couple of years and I attended a summer camp where those rules seemed to be turned upside down. There were certainly still folks who were more popular than others, but they seemed to be the ones that were the warmest and most welcoming. Love and Respect went to the people that invited newcomers into the circle. The ones who fostered connection instead of competition.

More love, less hate.

I remember wondering, how does a place like this happen? How did these camp councilors find all the most kind and generous people in the country bring them together for this one week every year?
One conversation in particular, has stuck with me. I was on a long walk with a new friend, and I don't actually remember exactly what I said, but I basically bragged to him that someone who we were both close with gave me a friendship bracelet instead of him.
And we all know that in the social currency of hippy love camp, friendship bracelets are the gold standard.

So here I was enjoying this person's company, and then saying this awful thing about who was closer friends with who. What I thought I knew about people and community was this boxing ring mentality, thinking that whoever throws the best punches wins.

But my new friend responded to my meanness with love in a way that I literally did not know was possible. He made eye contact and smiled and said with total sincerity how happy he was that I was finding a home there.
More connection, less competition.
Genuine Love, Creative Love

Whatever nonsense I'd learned about social hierarchy, or whatever awful lessons I'd internalized about how men are supposed to speak to each other, I saw for that moment at least, for the ridiculousness that it was. I didn't feel shamed, but I did feel silly, for having been stuck in this old way of thinking, believing that competition and put downs would get me somewhere.
He had literally loved the hell out of me.
Love that dismantles the status quo.

If we hope to build a more loving and just world, we need mentors like this. People to teach us the skills for beloved community.

If we have any hope for building the kind of world we want to live in, we need to seek those mentors who love us enough to meet us where we're at, and love us enough to not let us stay there.
And then we need to be that person for others.
Nobody, but nobody can make out here alone.

In the midst of a political and economic climate that's increasingly designed to set us apart, one from another, to divide us by religion, by race, by documented and undocumented, and by gender, it is a bold thing to join together in this Unitarian Universalist tradition of **love and justice**. And it is a powerful thing to seek out the kinds of community that will teach us the skills and give us the courage for

dismantling those false binaries. Places where we not only dream but live the reality of our beauty and our strength.

Years ago in college, I was at a training for street medics. Street medics are volunteer activists who provide first aid to protesters at mass demonstrations. I showed up excited to learn some new skills for healing this world. Of all things I learned about caring for people who have been attacked by police, or have just been out in the sun all day, one very specific tool for beloved community that they shared has stuck with me.

At the beginning of the training we were asked to introduce ourselves by sharing our name, where we were from, and the gender pronouns that we used. (Whether we wanted to be called by he, she, they, or something else).
All my life, people had read my gender in complicated ways. This was the first time though that I'd ever been explicitly offered the option of identifying my gender as I wanted, as felt right to me. No one had ever asked before.
Going on to learn the stories of transgendered people in my life and in my reading, my heart opened.
Even though I continued to identify as a male, I began to recognize how the multitude of behaviors, feelings, thoughts, and preferences that make me who I was, had been carved up and placed into these narrow boxes gender.

The invitation to share my pronoun, was an offering. You don't have to call yourself what the rest of the world has always called you.
You are invited to show up as yourself. No costume required.

The narrow boxes of gender limit us in different ways. Too often these made up rules, define not only the clothes we wear, how we speak to each other, who takes up space at the living table or the board room, who gets paid what for what work, and who gets to be president.
There are few among us for whom the made up story of our gender has not limited our understanding of who we are and who we might be.

I recently heard a story about basketball star Wilt Chamberlin, who despite being one of the greatest players of all time, was terrible at shooting free throw shots from the foul line. He normally only made an atrocious 40%. There was one game though, on March 2, 1962 where we made 90% of those shots. The difference in this one game, was that was he shot his free throws underhand from between his legs, "granny style," which is a better way to shoot free throws.

Despite having immediately solved his greatest weakness as a player though, in the last part of the game, he stops shooting underhand, because he said it made him feel like a sissy.

To the greatest basketball player of all time, the only thing more important than basketball, was not looking like a "sissy."

Wilt Chamberlin was clear that the narrow gender box of his masculinity was more important to him than basketball. More important than his career.
I wish that he'd perhaps had a camp friend at some point, or progressive faith community that could have helped him be more himself.
I don't know if we would say that a community could have loved the hell out of him, but at least loved the bad free throwing out of him.

Religion ought to be the place where we **dismantle the boxes** that have placed over us, locked down around us. Where we confront oppression wherever we find it, so that the inherent worth and dignity of all of us, can shine a little a brighter. Religious community should be a place of love that comes in rainbow colors.

Beloved ones, there are those of use who were raised as boys, educated into masculinity. We, who call ourselves men, have sometimes chosen misguided understandings of status, over our relationships. We've been taught sometimes to choose image over authenticity, speaking more than listening, or objectification instead of connection.
If that describes some piece of your own story, as it does mine, will you commit with me to rebuilding the skills for **beloved community** that sets our relationship which are certainly holy, ahead of the false idols of status or power?

Similarly, for those of us educated into the myth of whiteness, we have too often valued our comfort over justice, individualism above community, intellectualized empathy in place of gut level transformation.
We see this now reflected back to us in a country where black and brown people are scapegoated for the devastating effects of wealth inequality, and are summarily executed by our government in the streets without reprisal. So in this moment of national reflection, will you join me in recommitting to a moving through the discomfort of deep re-education, and loving justice not as an idea, but as a new way of life?

Nobody, nobody can make it out here alone.

In Canada earlier last year, a particularly concerning online video went viral. The video was a conservative religious woman rapping about how confused transgender people were and why they should not be allowed to use bathrooms for the gender with which they identify. An 11-year old Unitarian Universalist friend of mine, Anthony James, wanted to respond because having grown up in a UU community, he was confused that someone would think religion would ever be used for discrimination. As someone who himself identifies as gender creative, his experience of religion had been the first place where he was totally accepted without reservation.
So he organized his mom and dozens of other UU churches across the country to participate in a video sending messages of love and support to the trans

community and proclaiming the role of religion in celebrating our full humanity, regardless of gender expression.

When Anthony's mother expressed concern about him posting a video of himself online, speaking about this issue as a gender creative person, she said, "some people out there might hold that against you." But 11-year-old Anthony said, "Right, that's not a reason to be quiet, that's a reason to speak up."

When the world is sick, can't no one be well, but we are beautiful and we are strong.

In our world today, not only are individual prejudice and hate still with us, but there are systems of expanding violence and isolation that continue to divide us by gender, race, and class.
Bigotry in our world isn't just about hate speech and religious tests for refugees. It's in the school to prison pipeline, gender policing, and our systems of health care and housing.
I have a role in those systems, whether I like it or not, and I still have much to learn from about the ways my identity intersects with the world around me. So I'm looking for the communities and the mentors, that can teach me the skills of beloved community.

As a white guy with a middle-class background, I sometimes feel like I happened to wear the right costume to the party, so that by some accident of fate, things look more equitable than they are, or my community looks safer than it is.

I need people like Anthony and people like my summer camp friend to mentor me, to model for me, the tools of beloved community, because the nonsense I've internalized about gender roles and other stories I've been told about who I am and how to be. I'm still learning what it looks like to find those moments where we can change the rules of the game.

So I invite you to join me in seeking out those **mentors** that can show us the better way that we didn't know was possible.
When we find ourselves divided into false binaries, let's respond by **honoring** the full spectrum of humanity.
Genuine Love.

Where there is oppression, let us find the tools to celebrate diversity and **dismantle** the barriers to equality.
Creative Love.

Where many among us are marginalized, let's **redistribute power** of resources, wealth, and relationship.
Love that alters the status.

And in our prayers, our words, and in our faithful action, let us build the **Beloved Community** that we know is possible.
You are beautiful. You are Strong.

Ritual Note Passing
When I was thinking about the ups and down of coming of age, I had this moment of really missing what was once a daily spiritual practice of mine, called "the passing of notes in class."
So I'm going to invite you to share this ritual with me today.
I'd like you to think if there's someone in your life who's given you a glimpse of a better world, who's made your surrounding just a little bit safer, who's helped you to learn a little of the skills and understanding that we need for building beloved community. And write them a note. It can be a thank you note, a love note, coupon for a walk in the park. And sometime in the next week, when you're in class, or at work, passing by their house, pass them your note.

Reading

“When the World is sick, can’t no one be well, but I dreamt we were all beautiful and strong.”

Words from Maya Angelou:
Lying, thinking
Last night
How to find my soul a home
Where water is not thirsty
And bread loaf is not stone
I came up with one thing
And I don't believe I'm wrong
That nobody,
But nobody
Can make it out here alone.

Alone, all alone
Nobody, but nobody
Can make it out here alone.

“When the World is sick, can’t no one be well, but I dreamt we were all beautiful and strong.”

Now if you listen closely
I'll tell you what I know
Storm clouds are gathering
The wind is gonna blow
The race of man is suffering
And I can hear the moan,
'Cause nobody,
But nobody
Can make it out here alone.

Alone, all alone
Nobody, but nobody
Can make it out here alone.

"When the World is sick, can't no one be well, but I dreamt we were all beautiful and strong."

From Theologian, Rebecca Parker
Love, as I and many religious progressives understand it, is dangerous. We advocate for love that surprises, disrupts, and alters the status quo; that expresses itself in diverse ways, that comes in rainbow colors.
And from A. Powell Davies:
Love is not a sentiment, a mere indulgence, a tender softness towards all things, good or evil. Genuine love, creative love, is the most demanding thing in the world. It will not relax its standards-it will not because it cannot.

"When the World is sick, can't no one be well, but I dreamt we were all beautiful and strong."