"Love is Love"

A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Stephanie May
First Parish in Wayland
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On a sunny June morning two years ago, we gathered here for the joyous celebration of Flower Sunday. And yet, the just breaking news of a mass shooting at Pulse, a gay nightclub in Orlando, Florida, brought a somber note to the morning. After the service and the picnic, the Parish Committee voted to move our rainbow flag from the narthex inside to the front steps of the Meetinghouse. The word went out and by evening a group of us gathered on the steps, beside the flag, to remember those who had been killed, injured, and terrorized in the attack.

That night the Tony awards were held. Perhaps some of you watched them? If you had, you would have heard Lin-Manuel Miranda accept an award for his musical *Hamilton*. For his acceptance speech, Miranda wrote a sonnet for his wife, Vanessa, which also references Hamilton's wife, Eliza. He spoke:

My wife's the reason anything gets done
She nudges me towards promise by degrees
She is a perfect symphony of one
Our son is her most beautiful reprise.
We chase the melodies that seem to find us
Until they're finished songs and start to play
When senseless acts of tragedy remind us
That nothing here is promised, not one day.
This show is proof that history remembers
We lived through times when hate and fear seemed stronger;
We rise and fall and light from dying embers, remembrances
that hope and love last longer
And love is love is love is love is love is love is love is love
cannot be killed or swept aside.
I sing Vanessa's symphony, Eliza tells her story
Now fill the world with music, love and pride.

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And love is love is love is love is love is love is love is love. With these poetic words, Miranda reminds us all that love holds transcendent power spilling across time.

The phrase "love is love" predates Miranda's sonnet. However, Miranda's expansive use of the phrase in the context of the Pulse shooting reinforced the message of a love that transcends heterosexual boundaries. Love is love calls us to not rigidly limit who love whom. Love is love calls us to remember our own experience of love and to consider how another might also experience love. Love is love is love is love is love . . . beckons us to imagine a world awash in love, in loving relationships, in an abundant love freely flowing among us.

Such a vision of love resonates deeply with our religious tradition. The "universalist" of Unitarian Universalism emerges from a conviction of an abundant and inclusive love. It is a tradition that extends backs more than 200 years. As Alexander Hamilton was busy shaping the structures of our young nation, Universalist preachers began spreading the message of a love so big that *all* souls would be saved. One such preacher was Hosea Ballou. Riding his horse from town to town in Vermont, Ballou preached a loving God; a God whose love ignited goodness, not fear; a Love that looked past our brokenness and embraced us.

While fewer of us today may actively fear whether we are or are not good enough to be welcomed into heaven, the religious vision within Universalism remains startlingly relevant in our current world. Why? Because too many people continue to be treated with anything but love. Immigrants are separated from their children at the border. Blacks are shot by police and incarcerated at far higher rates than whites. And, LGBQT teens have suicide rates nearly triple heterosexual teens.

Every day's headlines seem to include examples of hate-filled rhetoric and actions. And then there are also all the incidents that would never quite make the headlines—the indifferent parent, the coworkers or peers whose disdain hovers just below the surface, or the neighbors who keep their distance when someone different moves in.

Again and again forces around us whisper to us that some of us are better than others, that some of us are less, that some of us are broken...are trash...are unworthy of belonging. We notice as the lines of inclusion and exclusion are drawn. We sense our place in the hierarchies of who does or does not matter. Again and again, we are shaped by these forces as we question our own worth or as we rest uneasily with the privileges awarded us.

I suspect that such forces and feelings have swirled within human society for millennia. They certainly were part of the New England Calvinist culture that gave rise to the

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Universalist message that God is *love*. Rather than fear a God who condemned so many to hell and torment and so very few to the peace of paradise, Ballou proclaimed a loving God who embraced *all* souls.

I know that God language can be a hindrance for some number of us here today. For some, God is an empty concept and for others an idea with too much baggage. I recognize this and use God-language sparingly as I lead worship. And yet, for me, sometimes I find myself reaching for God-language as the symbol and the concept that fits a feeling or an idea. I think Universalism is one of those places. For me, the message of Universalism that God is love teaches that the ultimate force—the divine power—of the universe is Love.

It can be so easy to believe otherwise. There are too many examples of hate and the cruelty of indifference. And yet, believing in Love as the unsullied soil of life teaches us to search for the love, to nurture that love, to live by that love. An abundant love that motivates us to denigrate no person as an animal. An expansive love that calls us to see the dignity in lives that we may not understand. A powerful love that transcends differences and insists that we all share a common destiny. [Love is love is love is love.]

And yet, even as we speak of a love that embraces *all* souls, *all* persons, and *all* lives, we must also attend to the particularity of lives. Moving too quickly to *all* risks missing the ways that the systems of hate and inequality have shaped us in such different ways. To be black or white, queer or straight, poor or wealthy, disabled or able-bodies . . . these are more than categories of identity . . .they point to differences in experiences. They point to inequalities and invisibilities. They point to anger and hope, fear and pride.

Perhaps it feels that I have strayed far from the theme of Pride and our new rainbow flag. But isn't this Love *why* we fly a rainbow flag on our Meetinghouse steps? We fly the flag as a symbol of a conviction that Love is Love, that a man loving a man is love, that a woman loving a woman is love, that loving both men and women is love, that loving the fluid, non-binary sense of self is love, that loving oneself in the gender you are is love. We fly the flag to affirm a Love that is expansive and inclusive.

But why *this* flag—this rainbow flag with its inclusion of black and brown stripes? A year ago in Philadelphia, this new version of the rainbow flag was chosen by city officials for the first annual Pride parade in the city. Part of a "More Color More Pride" campaign, the campaign states:

> In 1978, artist Gilbert Baker designed the original rainbow flag. So much has happened since then. A lot of good, but there's more we can do. Especially when it comes to recognizing people of color in the LGBTQ+ community. To fuel this

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important conversation, we've expanded the colors of the flag to include black and brown.

The black and brown stripes challenge us all to not forget the particular lives of LGBTQ folks of color. It is a response to a feeling of invisibility at best and of overt racism at worst.

Our social systems with its multiple categories and concepts of identifying people are not simple. While focusing on a single category of race, class, gender, or sexual orientation can help develop insights and understanding, none of us exist in only one category. For this reason, activists and theorist call for an *intersectional* understanding. Which is to say that the combined experience of racism and homophobia makes life different for a black or brown LGBTQ person than a white person. Acknowledging these differences, these intersectional experiences, challenges all of us to pay attention to the particulars. What does it feel like for person to face hate both for the color of their skin and for whom they love? Do we see the intersectional challenges for LGBTQ persons of color?

Like all of the colors in the rainbow flag, the black and brown stripes call us to see and to celebrate a diversity of lives, of loving, of being loved. They are an intentional addition to remind us to *not* forget the particularities, the intersections, and the possibilities of being in this world. They are an addition to remind the white community to not forget our racial prejudice when celebrating our LGBTQ pride.

In a moment, we will process together to the front stairs of the Meetinghouse to hang and dedicate our new rainbow flag. We do so as a community because more than 20 years ago we became a Welcoming Congregation by the vote of the community. This flag is a symbol of our shared values—to embody an inclusive love, a love that advocates for equality, and a love that both recognizes the intersecting particularities of each life and can transcend differences.

Our Universalist ancestor, Hosea Ballou, taught that we did not need to prove ourselves to God to receive God's love. Some worried that Ballou's proclamation of universal salvation would mean that people would have no motivation to be good if God would just take us as we are!?! But Ballou believed that we are good and that the affirmation of God's love for us would compel our own love. In other words, our actions need not be motivated by a sense of what we *should* do in order to be termed good enough, rather our experience of love can motivate us to love others.

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I hear an echo of this confidence in the power of love to transform society for good in the words of Lin-Manuel Miranda's sonnet:

This show is proof that history remembers
We lived through times when hate and fear seemed stronger;
We rise and fall and light from dying embers, remembrances
that hope and love last longer
And love is love is love is love is love is love is love is love
cannot be killed or swept aside.

Far from a simple sentiment of affection, love is a power that can transcend time and remake the world in which we live. Let us love. Let us be loved. Let us celebrate love—love is love is love.

So may it be.
Amen.

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