
**A GENERAL THEORY OF LOVE
OR, LIVING IN A TIME OF ANXIETY**
a sermon given by the Rev. Rosemary Lloyd
at the First Church in Boston
Sunday, March 30, 2008

The Sunday after Easter is also known in certain liturgical circles as “Low Sunday.” Some clergy say it is called that because there is such a low attendance at church compared to the swell in our ranks on Easter! More accurately, it is a “low” Sunday in comparison to the high water mark of the importance of Easter in Christianity. Just because you may be curious, this Sunday is also referred to as White Sunday or Whitsunday, referring to the white clothing that was worn by those baptized on Easter. It has also been called Quasimodo Sunday. I learned this fun fact reading *Wikipedia*. It’s true. The term came from the Latin text of the traditional Introit for this day, which begins “*Quasi modo geniti infantes...*” (“As newborn babes...”).¹ Some of you may now be musing: “Hmm, Quasimodo... ? That rings a bell....”

Quasimodo is the protagonist in Victor Hugo’s novel *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*. As an infant, he was left on the doorstep of the cathedral the Sunday after Easter and was named for the tradition of the day. So, you see, you can learn interesting things listening to a sermon...

Low Sunday.

It seems an apt descriptor in light of the generalized anxiety that seems to be moving like a wave through our culture. A disturbance in the field that grows more powerful with each news alert about the economy; the seemingly endless war; rumors of another conflict; political disgrace and betrayal. Have you felt it, too? This troubling of the waters, this sense of insecurity? That things are off -balance? That so much is clamoring for our attention that we feel distracted and disconnected from something essential...

Anxiety makes everything more stressful. It can cause us to wish that time would just stand still and the noise would stop so we could regain our bearings...

But life is fluid. It’s not a Kodachrome moment. Things change. We move in a great tide of experiences. Our job is to live with the ambiguity, the tensions, with uncertainty that comes with life in motion. To live as though there is only this moment AND plan for an unknown future with a semblance of confidence: that is the challenge inherent in being awake!

¹ Literally, *quasi modo* means “as recently [sc. born babes]”. “Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation, now that you have tasted that the Lord is good.” From the *First Epistle of Peter* (1 Peter 2:2)

But honestly, there are days when I don't feel quite up to the quest for enlightenment. I just want to nap—frequently. There are days we all dig deep for the faith that there is a reason to stay awake.

Perhaps this confession seems at odds with my general optimistic persona. But, you know, even optimists have bad days. And weeks.

Now you might wonder: isn't optimism just a bit unbecoming for a realist, a rationalist, or even a minister? Don't we have enough evidence to prove the futility of optimism? Perhaps. But even in a less-than-optimistic cycle, my personal belief system still embraces the affirmation that people are inherently good or at least capable of becoming good. And, optimist that I am (some could charge that this is even delusional), somewhere in the folds of my heart I still harbor the hope that someday the nations will come to understand the futility of war.

Now, before you stop listening to such bosh, please remember that great minds have wrestled through centuries of combat about why men and women go to war. When humanity reached the atomic era many thoughtful commentators thought (or hoped) that this would mark the end of war for it might otherwise mark the end of humankind.

Albert Einstein famously said, "I know not with what weapons World War III will be fought, but World War IV will be fought with sticks and stones."

Henry Stimson, President Truman's Secretary of War who argued persuasively to use the atomic bomb, defended his decision as "the least abhorrent choice," saying after the fact:

"In this last great action of the Second World War, we were given final proof that war is death. War in the twentieth century has grown steadily more barbarous, more destructive, more debased in all its aspects. Now, with the release of atomic energy, man's ability to destroy himself is very nearly complete. The bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki ended a war. They also made it wholly clear that we must never have another war. This is the lesson men and leaders everywhere must learn, and I believe that when they learn it, they will find a way to lasting peace."²

Sadly this has not been the case.

Still we wrestle, as we must, in the face of grave, generalized anxiety about a war that seems to have no end in sight. A war that was begun based on what now are clearly false pretenses, manipulated "facts" and a sanctioned cultivation of fear. (In my business, we call them lies.) We wrestle with coming to terms with the fact of war and the hope for peace. Is it mere optimism that humankind could learn that war is an obsolete method for resolving conflict? Or is there some reason—some logic, some science even—to expect that our hope for peace will triumph over the evidence of experience?

As Nazism was rising in Germany, Albert Einstein wondered: "Is there any way of delivering mankind from the menace of war?"; "How is it possible for a small clique to bend the will of the majority...to the service of their ambitions?"; and "Is it possible to

²From "The decision to use the Atomic Bomb," *Harper's Magazine*, February 1947. Reprinted in "War," *Lapham's Quarterly*, Winter 2008 (Vol. 1, No.1) p 172).

control man's mental evolution so as to make him proof against the psychosis of hate and destructiveness?"

With these serious questions at hand, he wrote to someone he thought might have some insight into the workings of the human mind, someone who was skillful grappling with the unconscious and coaxing repressed thoughts and feelings into consciousness. He wrote to Sigmund Freud.

Among Freud's theories is the idea that Love and Hate are instinctual and reside in each of us. Creative and destructive forces. Eros and *thanatos*. Rarely does an action follow from a single instinct, but from complicated interactions of motives and desires. "Musing on the atrocities recoded on history's page, we feel that [even] the ideal motive has often served as a camouflage for the lust of destruction..." wrote Freud. Based on his own theories, he added: "There is no likelihood of our being able to suppress humanity's aggressive tendencies."

However, he held out for one bit of optimism. He thought there was possibly a "formula for an indirect method of eliminating war." Our aggressive instincts cannot be eliminated, he said. But neither can our instinct for Love. His antidote for war was grounded in cultivating "[a]ll that produces ties of sentiment between [people]..." He believed we need to do all we can in our culture to strengthening the bonds of community. If we can build and strengthen relationships with others, we can increase our identification as "we." Love would become stronger than hate. He felt it reasonable for psychology to share in the oft-quoted religious advisory to "Love thy neighbor."

In an effort to build a relationship here, I would hazard to say that Freud seemed to have a little bit of the Unitarian Universalist in him. He advocated that "...men should be at greater pains...to form a ...class of independent thinkers...fervent in the quest of truth..." despite the disapproval that would come from politicians and "the Church." He hoped that this kind of independent search for truth would help individuals resist authoritarian abuse and calls for aggression.

In replying to Einstein's letter, Freud expressed a great curiosity about why some people protested vehemently against war rather than just accepting it as an unavoidable fact of life. A self-described pacifist, Freud wrote that every person "has a right over his own life and war destroys lives that were full of promise, it forces the individual into situations that shame his [humanity], obliging him to murder [others] against his will; it ravages material amenities, the fruits of human toil..." Given that "war today would mean the sheer extermination" of the combatants, Freud wondered "why the conduct of war is not banned by general consent."

Though he never chanced to say how long it might take for humanity to embrace his pacifist stand, he was cautiously optimistic that the basic impulse to preserve one's own life combined with "a well-founded dread of the form that future wars will take" might eventually put an end to war.

Yet here we are, wars later. The 5th anniversary of the war in Iraq. The 4000th American soldier killed in the seemingly endless conflict.

Few can fail to recognize the costs we are incurring every day. Does any thinking person fail to make the connection that for every dollar spent on war, a dollar does not

going to health care, housing, education, cancer research, rebuilding our deteriorating roads and bridges? Does any feeling person fail to understand what it is costing us in generalized anxiety? We live with fear and worry about our security.

Psychology 101: Human beings need security. From the time we are infants, our biology demands the security of knowing that we are connected and attended to and loved. According to some psychological theories, our fundamental fears and flaws derive from not receiving consistent security cues from our primary care relationships. Without it we become anxious, frightened, even combative. Even in psychology, the antidote to anxiety, to insecurity, and to war is love.

So simple. But not simplistic.

There is a biblical reading that couples often request for their wedding service. It begins:

“If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but do not have love, I have become a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.

If I have the gift of prophecy, and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge; and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing.”

Very early in my ministry, a woman asked that this passage from Corinthians be read at the graveside of the man to whom she had been married for nearly 50 years. Reading the words aloud in that setting, I understood how significant and appropriate they were to the moment. For all the exuberance of young love, it is no match for faithful love over many years and trials to reveal the hard-won truth of these words. What a goal and a challenge these words set before us:

“Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails.”

If we are being love, we are being patient and kind, if we are protecting and trusting, how could we be at war or praying for victories over our enemies? Who could be our enemy if we are loving our neighbor? It really does sound overly optimistic and seems to border on the simplistic. There is still that instinct for hate and for death and destruction working against this dream. But the wise text says: “love always hopes, always perseveres.”

When we love someone, we don't forget them. They are on our minds. We think about how their day is going. □ *Haply I think on thee, and then my state, /* □ *Like to the lark at break of day arising /* □ *From sullen earth, sings hymns at heaven's gate.*³ We are lifted up from feeling so low.

When we do things in love, when we give of our selves and our “materials amenities,” we are not supposed to expect anything in return. But I think I have to side with Freud here. I'm not sure that we humans are capable of doing things out of a single instinct or motivation. Our wiring is more complicated. We can strive to be aware of our

³ William Shakespeare, *Sonnet 29*.

motivations but they will be hard to see. Perhaps our positive, *eros*-leaning motivations are strengthened by the fact that we get something from our giving.

When we give love, we are lifted from the morass of our frustrations and anxieties, and are able to touch once again the core of our existence. We become more alive, more awake, more loving, and the giving goes on. (Can you feel the optimism building?) When we act in love, others feel it. They become less anxious, less insecure, less combative. Love becomes the antidote for war. This is the challenge and the hope that is set before us. To live love. To act in love is to give life the shape of justice. Justice is love in action. And Love never fails.

It's just a theory.

AMEN.