

Love Thyself
Robin Tanner
February 15th, 2009

I know we made valentines last week in the service, and Valentine's Day was yesterday, and you are probably up to here with this love feeling! But you see I am not quite done with this love thing.

I am not quite done with this love thing because I've had a little problem lately. I just can't seem to stop using the F word when I talk about love. It came up in the middle of my thesis. I kept saying it before writing this sermon. In fact, I think it may be impossible to talk about love in the 21st century without using the F word!

So I am sorry to offend, but I am going to talk about feminism today. That's right, Feminism with a capital F.

You see the traditional doctrine of love, delivered in weddings across the country, goes something like this:

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful, it does not rejoice in wrong doing, but rejoices in the truth.

So far, so good. The doctrine of love continues:

Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Endures all things? Bears all things? Believes all things? In this morning's reading, taken from the experiences of Rev. Rebecca Parker, we are challenged and moved to contemplate the impact of sacrificial love. This is a love that requires us to bear all things, believe all things, endure all things.

Parker recounts the real effects of sacrificial love. A young woman, Lucia has arrived at Parker's door. She tells Rev. Parker about her abusive relationship and the reasons she has stayed, "I went to my priest twenty years ago," she describes. "I've been trying to follow his advice. The priest said I should rejoice in my sufferings because they bring me closer to Jesus. Jesus suffered because he loved us."

Lucia's words haunt me. They haunt me because I've heard them before guised under the authority of nearly every religious tradition. You are to suffer because it brings you closer to the divine. Love requires that you bear all things, that you endure suffering in silence—the mark of a well-lived religious life. For a person a faith finds salvation in suffering. For a good mother sacrifices herself, for a good father swallows his feelings, for to be good means to suffer. For to love means to be hurt according to the myth of sacrificial love.

Sacrificial love has become deeply personal for me as I've spent the last year in research interviews for my senior thesis at divinity school. In my thesis, I decided to develop a theology of healing in response to interpersonal violence. So I decided to interview women about their

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spirituality and healing. I did not expect the brutality of the stories I heard. The women I interviewed told me about repeated stories of abuse in their life.

In each story, I heard echoes of the doctrine of love detailed by this morning's reading. Somewhere along the line someone had told them that to sacrifice was divine. In order to love, these women were told that they had to relinquish who they were in order to be a good lover, a good person, a good child of God.

That's a hard theology to embrace, and yet generations have and continue to espouse the doctrine of sacrificial love. We, in the Unitarian Universalist fold, may not foster such beliefs and yet through families, our religious pasts, as well as the message of the larger society we can find it creeping into our own lives.

A little story:

When I was in grade school, there was a poster on the wall with the golden rule: Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. Underneath the golden rule was a smaller poster with the following list: 1. God, 2. Others, 3. Yourself. Essentially the poster was a quick reference to a young child's life priorities.

The poster told a young child that God came first, then others, and finally oneself. In some ways this was a fine theology. Placing others before yourself is admired in society as the mark of a good neighbor and citizen.

This is where the F word-feminism is helpful. Feminism has given me the chance to look back on other possible implications of the poster. Equality for those oppressed clearly calls into question the doctrine of putting others before yourself.

Now, I don't want to tear down the theologies of my kindergarten teacher, but the problems with the poster in my grade school are evident. It taught us, the students, to essentially put everyone else first. In the end, we walked away believing that self-love was the same as selfish love, that you always had to put others first.

The insistence on putting others first, on denying yourself leads us down a dangerous path. In little ways, it can lead us to low self-esteem, to doubting ourselves, to exhaustion from constantly denying our greatest potential. Turning away from ourselves happens in small little ways, and in the worst cases to accepting an abusive relationship as the burden of the duty of sacrificial love.

Love does not excuse abuse. If you are listening to this sermon and hear nothing else please hear that we are here. That if you find it impossible to love yourself, if you find yourself lost and scared. Let me be clear, we are here for you.

I have a friend Rachel who used to love painting. I met Rachel long after she gave up painting. She was an artist at heart, a born creator that graced the world with her beauty. By the time I met Rachel, she had put away her paintings, her drawings, her art supplies where they gathered dust in her attic.

You see Rachel met someone and fell in love. She fell in love with someone who didn't have time for her painting. Rachel's husband wasn't the nicest man. He would put her down and make her feel like less of the incredible person she was, but by the time the kids came along she had long forgotten her painting, her art.

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I was shocked one day, when I went over to her house and found her paintings behind a door in the spare room. I was so excited to ask her who had created these brilliant canvasses of light and love bursting with cerulean blues and golden light. Her sketches were simple masterpieces drawing delicate strokes and lines into hands and faces that spoke stories through the page.

I asked Rachel why she didn't paint anymore. She looked at me, replying that "she was busy and never really an artist," but behind her casual reply was a fading smile and a deep sadness.

I know in my heart that Rachel's self love was made manifest in her painting, it fed her song to the song of her soul. But Rachel sacrificed her gift to the world, she no longer left time for herself in the day, letting weeks turn into months and months into years before she picked up a brush.

I want to be clear that self love doesn't mean you find a hobby, or that if you give up on a hobby you aren't loving yourself. Nor is self love about self indulgence, the golden toilet of Donald Trump.

Painting for Rachel was intimately tied into who she was.

In my own friends, in the women I've interviewed, in Parker's story we find that sacrificial love is not good for our women, it is not good for our men, it is not safe for our children. We are left with a legacy of half lived lives, of shattered selves in the wake of sacrifice that leaves very little love to be carried from one generation to the next.

Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, one of the foundational notable thinkers in feminist theologies, recently aptly described that feminism requires that we accept our differences and meet each other in mutual respect of our differences. We do not sacrifice who we are for the love of another, but rather deeply live into the awareness of who we are with respect for the differences that compose the sacred community.

If there is a belief in love, we the liberal Unitarian Universalist congregation may profess it's this: love thyself.

As I mentioned, I've found the creeping influence of sacrificial love in my own life. It's easy to forget to leave time and room for loving yourself. For me, that means baking. On a Sunday afternoon after church I head home to cook and bake. I stand in my kitchen kneading and stirring and mixing into creation nourishment out of disparate ingredients. That's the magic of my self love. It maintains me for the week and when I don't do it I find quickly that I am not only less compassionate with others but also less compassionate with myself. I second guess myself or become overly critical and my frustration is contagious.

I would guess that I am not alone. It's easy enough to forget to love oneself and it's hard to do! We are a people of faith raised in a world that professes sacrificial love. But, we have an alternative, salvific love that resists violence and protects our communities. We have the truth of pain, and suffering. We have self love. Love thyself.

How many folks have heard the song, The Greatest Love sung by Whitney Houston. Perhaps you know the lyrics, I'll spare you my voice in singing them:

I found the greatest love of all

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Inside of me
The greatest love of all
Is easy to achieve
Learning to love yourself
It is the greatest love of all

Well, I always thought it was kind of a corny song, about the children and learning to love yourself. Sappy, but I recently read the story behind the song which was written by Linda Creed also known as Linda Epstein the famous songwriter who wrote songs for soul groups. Linda wrote the Greatest Love of All while she was struggling with breast cancer. A young mother, Linda found that learning to love herself had been her salvation amidst the ravages of the disease. While Linda died from breast cancer in 1986 after an eleven year struggle with breast cancer, her song lives on in legacy for her children and for those searching for peace amidst struggle and pain.

Sometimes love is not patient. Love does not endure all things. Love does not bear all things. Love requires first that we love ourselves.

This past year and a half, I've spent studying violence and abuse attempting to create a theology of healing. The only conclusion that I can stand on, that will heal our communities marked by violence is simply this: loving requires living into who you are without apology. Love requires that you sometimes not say please and wait or be polite. Love requires that we act with respect for ourselves and others that in order to attain the bliss and joy of sacred union we must negotiate the boundaries that protect and sustain our communities. We have to stand up to violence, to abuse in our communities.

Simply put, love thyself.

The poet Derek Walcott aptly describes how one loves thyself in the poem Love After Love.

The time will come
When, with elation,
You will greet yourself arriving
At your own door, in your own mirror,
And each will smile at the other's welcome,

And say, sit here, Eat.
You will love again the stranger who was your self.
Give wine. Give bread. Give back your heart
To itself, to the stranger who has loved you

All your life, whom you ignored
For another, who knows you by heart.
Take down the love letters from the bookshelf,

The photographs, the desperate notes,

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Peel your image from the mirror.
Sit. Feast on your life.

My heart aches as I imagine the women I've interviewed encountering themselves in the mirror for the first time in a very long time. As they give back their heart to themselves, to the stranger that loved them all their life. As they take down the love letters, the soft notes written upon their heart that sing praises of their true selves. The selves that have been buried by sacrificial love.

Have you forgotten yourself? Have you lost the self that loves you before all others? It's hard when the images of perfection flash across the TV, when the one you love asks too much, when life gets busy and we forget who we are, but there is love waiting for you in the mirror, on the shelves of your life.

I hope that you may find time in the next week, in whatever way you can to love yourself. Maybe it starts with picking up that brush and making the first mark on the canvass. Or perhaps for you loving yourself requires reading a book or simply sitting in a chair near the sunlight.

The story of who we are is incredibly complicated. The story of love is incredibly complicated, yet its pure manifestation is as rare as it is simple.

Our communities are founded upon self love. The covenant of our congregations rests upon the covenant, our promise to each other to act in love and respect. Our covenant requires us to possess a deep abiding self love that sets the boundaries of community. Hand cannot be joined unto hand or heart unto heart until we can embrace the love within each of our own hearts.

The women I've interviewed were not only unable to love themselves, but they also found as they entered communities that they couldn't love others, couldn't say no or set boundaries that allow our communities to survive and thrive.

Love sometimes require cease to give away not only who we are but further what communities hold true. Love is not patient in the face of abuse. Love does not endure violence or bear silently pain inflicted by another. Love calls us to a higher source, the sacred self resting in each of our souls. That self saves us in the pain, calls us to survive, to leave behind the sacrifice and fall again in love with ourselves in the mirror. To take down the love letters once lost.

Love thyself.

It is a radical proclamation against the traditional doctrine of sacrificial love.

Love thyself, in the mirror, in the awkward stumbling, in the loud rumbling of our stomachs in the silence of a pause, love thyself in the rage, in the storm, love thyself in wrinkles and flaws, in little mistakes and starting over, in the not quite done, never quite enough yet always and ever exactly enough.

Love thyself.