

Labors of Love (Flower Service)

Theodore Parker Unitarian Universalist Church

May 13, 2018

The Consecration of the Flowers



Whenever Dr. Norbert Capek conducted his Flower Service in Prague, he would say this proverb as he "consecrated" the flowers:

Infinite Spirit of Life, we ask thy blessing on these, thy messengers of fellowship and love. May they remind us, amid diversities of knowledge and of gifts, to be one in desire and affection May they also remind us of the value of comradeship, of doing and sharing alike. May we cherish friendship as one of thy most precious gifts. May we not let awareness of another's talents discourage us, or sully our relationship, but may we realize that, whatever we can do, great or small, the efforts of all of us are needed to do thy work in this world.

Story for All Ages

One Flower in a Field

Adapted from a story by Joshua Searle-White

Once upon a time there was a field. And even though the field itself was a bit dry, it was filled with beautiful flowers. Now you might wonder how all these flowers grew so well in a dry field, and the answer is this: Right next to each flower was a little hole, and in each hole was an animal. There were lots of rabbits, but also hedgehogs and field mice and even a badger or two.

One of these animals, a rabbit, took particularly good care of the sunflower that grew up next to her burrow. Every day she went down to the stream, scooped up water in a leaf, and fed her flower. It grew tall and bright and beautiful. She was very proud of it.

One day, on a trip down to the stream, the rabbit noticed another flower that did not look so healthy. The soil around it was dry and cracked. The flower itself was drooping and discolored. Something inside the rabbit felt very upset. Where was the animal that was supposed to be caring for this flower? This was not right! A flower was not supposed to be left there drooping and thirsty with no one to care for it. And so the rabbit did ... nothing.

Why did she do nothing? Well there were a few reasons, and the main one was that the rabbit was frightened. She did not understand what she saw. It seemed wrong to her, and it scared her. Also, she

was nervous that if she tried to water the flower, someone, maybe the animal that was supposed to care for that particular flower, would get mad at her. It wasn't her job, after all, to take care of a flower that was not hers. Better just to leave the whole thing alone, the rabbit thought to herself.

But each day when the rabbit went down to the stream to get water for her sunflower she would see the other flower there, dry and drooping. Each day the soil around it looked dryer and the flower drooped a little lower. Finally, the rabbit couldn't stand it any longer. "It's just not right," she thought. "Flowers are not supposed to wilt like that. Flowers should be healthy and colorful and bright and beautiful." And she scooped up a leaf full of water, hopped over, and watered the drooping flower. And then she hopped away as quickly as she could.

The very next day the rabbit came back to water the flower again. This time she stayed a moment longer to whisper a little encouragement into its petals, and then she hopped away again.

Each day the rabbit came back, and each day the flower grew stronger and bigger and brighter. No one yelled at the rabbit for watering the flower; in fact, the other animals nodded at her and smiled when they saw her do it. They seemed relieved that someone was finally watering the drooping flower.

And as she continued to water the flower the rabbit noticed something amazing. As the drooping flower recovered its color and beauty, all of the flowers in the field seemed to stand a little taller, shine a little brighter. The field itself seemed greener and more beautiful. And the rabbit felt at peace.

May this story unfold in your hearts until we meet again.

SERMON

Labors of Love

The Rev. Anne Bancroft

I want to begin this morning with a **Prayer for All Who Mother** – the words of my colleague the Rev. Victoria Weinstein.

We reflect in thanksgiving this day for all those whose lives have nurtured ours.

The life-giving ones

who heal with their presence

who listen in sympathy

who give wise advice ... but only when asked for it.

We are grateful for all those who have mothered us

who have held us gently in times of sorrow

who celebrated with us our triumphs -- no matter how small

who noticed when we changed and grew,

who praised us for taking risks

who took genuine pride in our success,
and who expressed genuine compassion when we did not succeed.
On this day that honors mothers
let us honor all mothers
men and women alike
who from somewhere in their being
have freely and wholeheartedly given life, and sustenance, and vision to us.
Dear God (Spirit of Love among and between us), Mother-Father of us all,
grant us life-giving ways
strength for birthing,
and a nurturing spirit
that we may take attentive care of our world,
our communities, and those precious beings
entrusted to us by biology,
or by destiny,
or by friendship, fellowship or fate.
Give us the heart of a mother today.
Amen

Our sermon title today is “Labors of Love.” Given the proximity to Mother’s Day, you may be concerned that I will be sharing birthing experiences with you ... no worries. While bringing a child into this world is labor, however it happens, those are not the Labors of Love we’ll be exploring today.

I want us to consider, imaginatively, the many ways in which our loving can sometimes FEEL like hard work, even sometimes actually BE hard work – and yet be the most important thing we will ever do. In many ways, they define us, don’t they, those labors that “from somewhere in [our] being have freely and wholeheartedly given life, and sustenance, and vision?”

Sometimes, of course, what really IS labor doesn’t feel at all like hard work. As an example, one of you (who will likely be obvious in short order!) sent me a story recently: Labors of Love ... Bee my Honey!

I love bees. I love everything about them. I love their love of community and togetherness, I love watching them. I love setting up hives and being in community with other beekeepers & friends of beekeepers It’s a blessing to visit both the garden & the bees.

Yesterday I was at an apiary doing a “hive dive” with a friend and we saw a swarm of bees clustered together on a tree branch. *[Which is when I, who do not quite understand this particular labor of love, would be walking quickly in the other direction]* The bees were looking for a new home. We grabbed a box and coaxed the bees inside. We drew straws to see who would take the bees. My friend won and took the bees home. *[Her friend WON because SHE got to take a box full of bees home!]*

Later that same day I got a call saying there was a swarm of bees in a Norway Maple tree in Roslindale So I called my apiary friend, [who] went out to the Rozzi Norway Maple tree and successfully coaxed the swarm into a box.

As luck would have it, I had an empty hive setup nearby ... where a previous hive had not been able to survive. He drove the swarm the few blocks over to the empty hive and placed the bees inside. [So now] the swarm has a new home in a lovely yard near good friends.

Now THAT is a labor of love that does not feel SO MUCH like labor, right? What a gift. I hope you each have some love that feels so labor-less in your life. Can you imagine it now? Like the flower in our story this morning, creation is cared for – and many flowers brighten. Many bees are the better for these labors.

But there are other labors, of course, that feel less a gift ... love for others, for example, when the other is not so easy to love: someone not well, maybe, in mind, or body, or spirit – the other who is demanding or difficult – the other who we don't understand, or who is struggling or suffering. The labor that asks us to sit with the lost or broken as best we can – though at any given point in time we may not be convinced we're up to the task. It's hard enough to care for the things that are easily cared for around us. We may not be convinced we want to be up to the task of "the other."

The rabbit felt bad that a flower could be so neglected. And then she did ... nothing.

It's not always in us, at least at first.

I recently attended a conference in Manhattan called Revolutionary Love. The conference is an annual affair at Middle Collegiate Church, an intentionally multigenerational, multicultural, multiracial congregation. It is a densely packed weekend of spirit, song, and speakers – people like Sister Simone Campbell, the primary mover and shaker of Nuns on the Bus; and Parker Palmer, the Quaker writer and activist, who wrote *Let Your Life Speak*, among others; and this year a young Sikh woman named Valerie Kaur – civil rights activist and faith leader, lawyer, filmmaker – total underachiever, as you can imagine. She is engaged with others in promoting Love as a public ethic. This is the Revolutionary Love of which they spoke. Can you imagine, if love was our default in the public sphere, how different the world would feel?

When Valerie speaks about love for others, she encourages that we see no stranger. "You are the part of me I do not yet know." And she asks us to consider, "What is MY role in your flourishing?"

I wish that was what came to mind for me every time I felt challenged to be loving ... what is MY role in your flourishing? As opposed to what I often feel, which is, “What is your role in my flourishing and why isn’t it happening right now?”

It’s not simple – love - or easy – it CAN and DOES feel like work to step outside ourselves and care for the other sometimes.

It wasn’t her job, after all, to take care of a flower that was not hers. “Better just to leave the whole thing alone,” the rabbit thought to herself.

And, if loving “the other” were not hard enough, what about love of the one we don’t just not know, but the one we think we know enough to call our nemesis, our enemy – someone who may have done wrong by us or someone we care about? How is it we might come to see and understand, even to love, “the opponent”?

Some of you walked in the Mother’s Day Walk for Peace this morning. Tina Chéry, whose son was killed in the crossfire of a shooting nearly two decades ago, has met with and forgiven the shooter – a labor of love almost unimaginable.

Dear God (Spirit of Love among and between us), Mother-Father of us all,
grant us life-giving ways
strength for birthing,
and a nurturing spirit
that we may take attentive care of our world,
our communities, and those precious beings
entrusted to us by biology,
or by destiny,
or by friendship, fellowship or fate.

A small group of us recently attended a presentation at Temple Hillel B’nai Torah by two men from a group called Combatants for Peace. One was Palestinian; the other, Israeli. You can imagine their beginnings in their own respective cultures – perceiving the other as enemy, a threat to their very existence – and yet, through what has most certainly been a labor of love, they have come to know each other and to **value peace above self-interest** – or perhaps peace as the higher self-interest. They have found the common ground to challenge the systems that are making them enemies to begin with. They have discovered the good that could be shared that is more important for them both rather than hanging onto the hate that entrenched them apart.

Finally, the rabbit couldn't stand it any longer. "It's just not right," she thought. "Flowers are not supposed to wilt like that. Flowers should be healthy and colorful and bright and beautiful." And she scooped up a leaf full of water, hopped over, and watered the drooping flower.

We have heard these lessons before, right? Jesus taught them – the Good Samaritan so familiar to us. Gandhi taught them, and King – lessons of caring for the other, and for our enemies: restorative justice, of non-violent communication and activism.

What Valerie Kaur from the Revolutionary Love conference adds is what she calls a "feminist intervention": that loving others and loving our opponents requires us to love ourselves as a means of being able to be brave. "Mothering has taught me," she says, "that we love ourselves when we breathe through the fire of pain and refuse to let it harden into hate."

Summoning the capacity to believe in ourselves, to love ourselves enough to BE brave – maybe this is our hardest Labor of Love: to remember our own value when we doubt it, our own capacity for creativity and goodness and joy; our own capacity to see the other, to forgive the enemy.

As the drooping flower recovered its color and beauty, all of the flowers in the field seemed to stand a little taller, shine a little brighter.

When Valerie describes the imperative to love oneself, she speaks in terms of breathing and pushing – breathing in strength, and pushing beyond our own limits: lessons of the labor that are familiar to her and to some of us from personal experience and to some of us through imagination. Still, we can feel the need for breath, the breath of spirit that calls us to courage, sourcing our ability to push ourselves into new directions, new capacities.

On this day that honors Mothers
let us honor all mothers
men and women alike
who from somewhere in their being
have freely and wholeheartedly given life, and sustenance, and vision to us.

Love is sweet labor, she reminds us, fierce, and imperfect. Would that all labors of love were like our beekeeper's story, but we know that's not true. So often, the more frequent labors required of us feel like more than we can bear, more than we have to offer, but the world we want to see, the world we want to inhabit needs us to step up, to breathe deeply and to push harder than we have pushed before, to labor a new love into being.

At the end of the day, it's what defines us, isn't it? The love we CHOOSE to share, and where we choose to share it.

I hope you will take a flower with you today – a reminder of your individual beauty, always made more so in the company of others.

Infinite Spirit of Life – I ask thy blessing on these, the messengers of fellowship and love. May they be one in desire and affection –

Amen.

Our search for love continues, friends – AND you will have noticed that our offering is being received following the sermon. At the end of the Offertory, which is familiar to many of you, you will be invited to join with the choir in our forever search for more love somewhere. Your gifts are most gratefully received.

Offertory and Closing Hymn “There is More Love Somewhere”

African American hymn/95 in *Singing the Living Tradition*