

***Reminders of Who You Are***  
**Sunday, January 8, 2017**

For four summers, back when I was minister of the UU Church of Saco and Biddeford, I was a co-leader for the junior high week at Ferry Beach, one of our UU Camp and Conference Centers. Every year I and the other leaders came up with a different catchy title to describe what we were going to do, but every year, the theme was really the same – we designed the week to help the youth feel good about themselves and to show them that putting down someone else is not a good way to build yourself up.

“No put downs” was the unalterable rule of the week. By the camp’s end the youth would be chanting our slogan with us – “he’s not weird, he’s just different!” We wanted nothing more and nothing less than for each of them to take to heart the good news that all of them were equally wonderful and lovable, each with unique, precious gifts.

Whatever their circumstances, it was always a message they needed to hear. As you may remember from your own adolescence, this is not an easy time. With changing bodies, changing emotions, and changing roles, they feel confused, angry, rebellious, and sometimes unloved and unlovable. It can make perfect twisted sense to pull themselves into security by pulling someone else out of it. And so they label each other – weird, stupid, fat, ugly – as if loveliness were limited to a few and excluding another made them more likely to be among that few.

So we would spend the week in games, discussion groups, and activities all with the underlying purpose of helping them feel good about themselves and about one another. Even a week can make some positive changes. One girl told me, when I saw her a few months after her camp session, that it had been hard for her to face going back to school at the end of our week, but she had learned that just because people tried to put her down didn’t mean she had to accept what they said as true. Her insight made all the work and stress of the week worth it for me. But still, a week wasn’t nearly long enough to help all of them accept themselves as loved and lovable. And even when we could see changes, we knew that they were going back to the same situation which produced the negative self-image in the first place, and we’d fear the changes wouldn’t last. So much else would have to change for each of them to feel secure.

Issues of self-esteem, of not feeling loved and lovable, don’t magically disappear when we leave adolescence. Though in different ways and to different degrees, most of us experience feelings of insecurity and worthlessness. Just think, for example, of all the times someone has complimented you on something you’ve written or painted, crafted or built, on an insight you’ve shared or an activity you’ve led, and how you dismissed that compliment, not out of modesty but because you thought you didn’t deserve it. That way of dealing with it only diminishes yourself

- and the person who admired your accomplishment – but often, when insecurity runs deeper, we try to make ourselves feel better by taking down someone else. We minimize their success and accomplishments as we pump up our own. We put ourselves forth as experts on everything. Some become name-droppers, hoping to prove that if these important people like and respect them, they must indeed be likable and worthy human beings. How often it turns out that the one who seems arrogant and over-bearing is really insecure! - Could we perhaps be seeing this in our president?

One of those summers at Ferry Beach was especially interesting. Because of some administrative glitch, the other camp I used to co-lead, one for adults, was scheduled for the same week as the junior high camp. I felt like a sit com character, trying to juggle the two groups, dashing back and forth between them, from one end of the campground to the other, so that neither would feel short-changed. But the conjunction also offered insights.

The adult conference, which I co-lead for several years with my colleagues Terry Burke and Michael Boardmann, was called “One Mountain, Many Paths,” and that summer we were looking at Jesus from a UU perspective – who he said he was and who we thought he was. Each conference helped me reflect on the other, and this was especially true on the day that the “One Mountain, Many Paths” group discussed the story of Jesus’ baptism.

Before he began his ministry, before he had preached or healed or taught, before he had attracted a single follower, Jesus went out to the river Jordan to hear another man, John the Baptizer, preach. At this time John was the one attracting great crowds of people wanting to change their lives. He told people that they needed to turn their lives around, to turn back to what really mattered, and to show the fruits of justice and mercy in their lives. John, a Jew, used the ancient ritual of baptism to help people seal their desire for new life – immersing them in the waters of death, which then became the waters of birth, as they came up out of them into the air. Jesus was among those who went out to the Jordan to hear John, and like so many others, he too was moved to turn his life around. None of the gospel writers tells us what Jesus had been doing in his adult life before this time, so we don’t know what he needed to turn from. But life in an occupied land, dealing with the occupiers and the collaborators, observing and experiencing the consequences of the oppressive laws, navigating a corrupt system, means that everyone at the time was dealing with moral ambiguity. So Jesus went into the Jordan to declare his desire to live without these compromises, to live and proclaim what was true and good and just. The writers of the gospels of Mark, Matthew, and Luke all tell the story of what happened next. As he came up out of the water, the heavens opened, Jesus saw the spirit of God like a dove descending upon him, and he heard the voice

of God saying, “You are my beloved son. With you I am well pleased.” Only then, after that vision of being claimed by love, did he begin his own preaching, teaching, and healing.

In our discussion of this passage, the “One Mountain, Many Paths” group was especially struck by the sequence of events – they noticed that Jesus is named as beloved before he has done anything to earn this love. He is loved for who he is, as he is. Since our tradition understands Jesus as a human being, the group took from this story the good news that we too are loved for who we are, without having to earn that love. The love exists even as we exist.

This idea seemed radically new to us, even though it is not at all new in Judaism, Christianity or in other world religions. For instance, in the writings of the prophet Isaiah, which Jesus would have been able to recite, Isaiah imagines Yahweh saying to the people: “The mountains may disappear, and the hills may come to an end, but my love will never disappear; my promise of peace will not come to an end.” (54:10, *New Century* translation) In the Sufi tradition of Islam, the poet Rumi wrote:

*With every breath  
the sound of love  
surrounds us,...  
The Human Being, like a bird of the sea,  
emerged from the ocean of the soul....  
  
[We] are pearls of that ocean;  
all of us live in it.*

And the Christian mystic Julian of Norwich heard God say to her in one of her visions,

*What, do you want to know your lord's meaning  
in this thing?  
Know it well, love was his meaning.  
Who reveals it to you? Love.  
What did he reveal to you? Love.  
Why does he reveal it to you? For love.  
Remain in this and you shall know more of the same.  
But you shall never know different in this, without end.*

And she reflected on her vision, “Thus I ... saw most surely in this and in all, that before God made us he loved us, which love was never slaked nor ever shall be. ... In this love we have our beginning, and all this shall we see in God without end.”

This understanding may not be new theologically but it is still radical. In an op ed piece in the *New York Times* this past week a reporter from a rural area of Iowa pondered why so many of the well-meaning, hard-working people in his area voted for Donald Trump. One of the factors he cited was rooted in a difference in this theological understanding of what it means to be human. He wrote, *It took a 2015 pre-caucus stop in Pella by J. C. Watts, a Baptist minister raised in the small town of Eufaula, Okla., who was a Republican congressman from 1995 to 2003, to begin to understand my neighbors — and most likely other rural Americans as well.*

*“The difference between Republicans and Democrats is that Republicans believe people are fundamentally bad, while Democrats see people as fundamentally good,” said Mr. Watts. “We are born bad,” he said... “Democrats believe that we are born good.”* (from *Why Rural America Voted for Trump* by Robert Leonard, NYT 1/5/15)

When you believe people are born bad, the author concluded, you attribute their actions solely to their own bad choices. So gunmen in schools, airports, and nightclubs, the problems of homeless families, of gangs and of drug addiction reflect the bad choices of bad people. But when you believe people are inherently good, children of love and light, then you look at larger reasons, systemic causes for their making these bad choices and work to pass measurers like gun control and changes in educational funding to support people in making good choices. When you believe people are bad, you see yourself as totally separate from them, without power to alter or affect their choices. When you understand people as basically good, shaped by unhealthy systems into making those bad choices, you see yourself as one with them and responsible to do what you can to re-shape those systems.

So think about the difference it could make if we lived out our belief that we ourselves and every other person is a child of love. How might your perspective shift if at every turning point, you, like Jesus, heard an inner voice telling you that you are precious regardless of what you do? How might that bedrock of love affect your choices? And how might your perspective and your actions shift if you thought to yourself “this person is precious, a being of light” while you read news stories of refugees, of children trying to learn in underfunded and unsafe schools, of homeless people, and when you when you encounter people, friendly and unfriendly, even Donald Trump supporters? “This person is precious, a being of light.” What if the greeting “namaste,” “the light in me greets the light in you,” weren’t confined to our yoga classes?

Today, many Christian congregations are hearing and reflecting on the story of Jesus’ baptism as an epiphany – there’s that word again – of Jesus’ role and

power to himself and to others. But I am holding up this story today as an epiphany of and for each of us. Our theme this month is sharing light. In order to develop a vision statement for First Parish, we need to know what light we have to see by – without light, we don't have much vision. And in our tradition we believe that the light comes not from one particular person but from all of us together. My light, your light, we need all our lights to see clearly so that we can reach out in love and justice.

As we develop our vision for First Parish, let's think about both those components. What is our vision for encouraging all of us here within this congregation to uncover and feed our flames? How can everything we do here: our worship, our spiritual deepening programs for our children, youth and adults, our social justice efforts, even our social programs and our building facilities help all our flames to burn brighter? and how can those same programs: our worship, our spiritual deepening programs, our social justice efforts, social programs and building facilities all work together to offer the lights of love and justice to the world?

Perhaps the most important contribution we as a Unitarian Universalist community have to offer today is our good news of the inherent worth and dignity of each individual. Let us preach the gospel of light and love, the good news that each person is precious and loved and must be treated with loving care.

You are the light of the world. Namaste.

- Pamela M. Barz

## Readings

*Poem* by Mary Oliver

The spirit  
 likes to dress up like this:  
 ten fingers,  
 ten toes,  
  
 shoulders, and all the rest  
 at night  
 in the black branches  
 in the morning  
  
 in the blue branches  
 of the world.

It could float, of course,  
but would rather

plumb rough matter.

Airy and shapeless thing,  
it needs  
the metaphor of the body,

lime and appetite,  
the oceanic fluids;  
it needs the body's world,  
instinct

and imagination  
and the dark hug of time  
sweetness  
and tangibility

to be understood,  
to be more than pure light  
that burns  
where no one is --

so it enters us --  
in the morning  
shines from brute comfort  
like a stitch of lightning;

and at night  
lights up the deep and wondrous  
drownings of the body  
like a star.

*Matthew 5:14-16a*

You are like light for the whole world. A city built on top of a hill cannot be hidden, and no one would light a lamp and put it under a clay pot. A lamp is placed on a lampstand, where it can give light to everyone in the house. Make your light shine.