

“Maybe Scared is What Brave Feels Like”
Sermon 07 October 2018
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Reading:

Bussie, Jacqueline A.. *Love Without Limits: Jesus' Radical Vision for Love with No Exceptions* (pp. 140-141). Fortress Press. Kindle Edition.

I've wondered why my mother didn't leave, and I've had a heartbreaking epiphany: only someone who believed they deserved better could ever muster the courage to get out. And only someone who loved herself sufficiently could ever believe they deserved better. People accept only the amount of love they believe they deserve. My mother accepted a life of tiny love because she believed that is exactly what she deserved, and not a teaspoon more. Much like an anorexic starves herself because she wrongly believes she is fat, my mother deprived herself of better because the low way she was treated matched the worthlessness she (wrongly) saw in the mirror. My question assumed that my mother loved herself enough to imagine that she merited more, which of course, she did not. With all my heart, I believe that God's love without limits wanted more for my mother than for her to be walked on.

Contrary to what we might expect, a love without limits does not say to those who abuse other people, “Do anything to me that you wish, and I will stay with you.” Instead, it says, “Yo. Here's the door. My self-love's too big to be in the same room with you.”

Sometimes, especially in situations of abuse, we have to draw boundaries to protect ourselves from harm. I know I sound like a hypocrite here. All this talk about broadening love's bandwidth, stretching the canvas, erasing the circle, no asterisks, no exceptions, and now I'm talking about closing doors, walking out, saying no, and drawing lines in the sand? Yes, I am, and I must. A love without limits is not a rug or chair on which other people can stand or sit, it is a chandelier. A chandelier casts equal light on everyone in the room, including yourself.

Helen Beth, the same friend who taught me the left-hand writing, once attended a retreat on centering prayer, a prayer technique that uses a lot of rich, vivid visualization in order to help people heal. The retreat leader asked participants to picture in their mind's eye a person who had seriously hurt them by transgressing a personal boundary— physical, emotional, psychological, sexual— anything. “Can you see that person in your mind?” the retreat leader asked everyone present.

“Good. Now picture the boundary that they crossed. Picture it as a fence. Can you see the fence?” Everyone nodded from behind closed eyelids.

“Excellent,” said the retreat leader. “Now I want you to muster your strength, and do something brave. Kick them out! That's right, you heard me. Kick them right on outta there. KICK THEM OUT back across that fence, and straight into the LOVE OF GOD.”

I love that reading. “Kick them back out into the love of God.” Love is a behavior, not a feeling. And sometimes the most loving thing to do is to insist on the love we ourselves are worthy of receiving.

It’s been a tough couple of weeks, hasn’t it? But earlier this week, I had the pleasure of attending a dinner in celebration of the anniversary of the 2010 repeal of the Don’t Ask Don’t Tell Act. Is everyone familiar with this? How do I explain something that was supposed to be an improvement but was actually nonsensical? Prior to Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell, Gays were not allowed in the military. The premise of DADT was this: as long as you hide who you are and pretend to be something you’re not, then you can serve your country. We won’t ask and you won’t tell.

Someone very dear to me was one of the last people processed out under DADT before the act was repealed. And this past week, she returned to her former unit to speak. She looked out at the dinner attendees, who can now be honest and open with their whole selves, and she told them: *I want you to know you are beautiful and perfect just as you are and I want you to remember that when you are faced with having to choose between what is easy and what is right...between love and doing what goes against our consciences. Acting from your integrity and standing up for what is right might seem scary and not worth the risk. But I’m here to tell you that the consequences for speaking out are not nearly as severe as the consequences for remaining silent.*

See, we think of love as being a feeling, but love is really like this reading we just heard. Love is a behavior, and when love is violated, when we're asked to section ourselves off, to pretend that we are not who we are, when someone crosses a boundary with us, the most loving thing to do is to send them back out, kick them back over the fence into the love of God.

And share this story and this reading because I want to say the same thing to each of you here in our church today. You are beautiful and perfect and loved and you are enough. I want you to hear this and hold onto it as we talk about all the work of justice that is before us. None of us will ever be able to do enough to fix it all. We will never be able to put it down and be finished. We cannot do enough, but we ARE enough. Can you see the difference there? You are enough.

So if you are hurting today. If you are angry today. If you are feeling tattered and torn. You can rest and breath here. You are not alone. We are a church of healing and justice within a larger, worldwide denomination of healing and justice. Yesterday, our Unitarian Universalist Association released a statement denouncing the confirmation of Brett Kavanaugh to the Supreme Court and I want to read it to you:

THE UUA DENOUNCES BRETT KAVANAUGH’S CONFIRMATION TO THE SUPREME COURT

We believe Professor Anita Hill.

We believe Dr. Christine Blasey Ford.

We believe survivors of sexual assault and sexual harassment.

Because we believe survivors, we cannot be silent about the profound harm in confirming Brett Kavanaugh to the Supreme Court.

The Senate's decision to confirm Kavanaugh is an affront to every survivor of sexual harassment and assault. His confirmation tells survivors that their pain and trauma do not matter. How can survivors believe in justice when sexual assault is normalized by our elected leaders?

Although we are profoundly disappointed with this confirmation, we are not shocked.

Kavanaugh's confirmation mirrors the unapologetic toxic masculinity of this political moment and the Trump administration. President Trump [openly mocked Dr. Ford after her testimony](#), which isn't surprising considering [cavalier remarks he has made about women and sexual assault](#).

In response to this confirmation, and the blatant sexism and toxic masculinity it represents, we know it is time, first, to mourn and recharge. This confirmation process has been extremely triggering for many survivors, and we encourage survivors to listen to their spirits that may be calling for care.

Those of us who are not survivors, but allies, commit to making space for your pain.

We will mourn.

And then, we will resist.

We will join with the many organizations led by women, non-binary people, and people of color who believe in a world that doesn't support sexist leadership.

We will partner with the faith leaders and spiritual communities who believe our collective healing from cycles of abuse and trauma can set us free.

We will continue to advocate for [sex education that normalizes consent and body autonomy](#).

We believe a new way is possible.

We believe in world where consent is the norm, not the exception. A world where governments believe and protect survivors of assault. A world where women, children, and non-binary people are safe.

Despite Brett Kavanaugh's confirmation to the Supreme Court, we still believe a world without toxic masculinity is possible.

And we commit to do our part to make it so.

A question came up after this dinner of celebrating the repeal of the Don't Ask, Don't Tell policy, and the question was, "Can we teach moral courage? Can we teach bravery?" Do you think it's possible? I hope so, because I think that's why we're here, because we believe we can.

We don't often think about how it feels. What is the experience of being brave? That being brave doesn't feel brave. It doesn't always feel safe, but we believe that we can do it. We believe that maybe scared is what brave feels like, and when we come together in community, we're willing to be scared. We're willing to admit that we don't know the answers. We don't know exactly what to do, but we will still act.

October is Domestic Violence and Intimate Partner Violence Awareness Month. One in three people in every gathering, every place that we go, including this church, one in three people have experienced some kind of sexual and gender-based violence.

Sexual and Gender Based Violence (SGBV) is any sexual or physical act, attempt to obtain a sexual act, unwanted sexual comments or advances, or acts to traffic, or otherwise directed, against a person's sexuality using coercion, by any person regardless of their relationship to the victim, in any setting. SGBV also includes any gender-motivated act that results in, or is likely to result in physical, sexual, or psychosocial harm or suffering, including threats of such acts, coercion, or arbitrary deprivation of liberty.

IPV includes four types of behavior:

- Physical violence is when a person hurts or tries to hurt a partner by hitting, kicking, or using another type of physical force.
- Sexual violence is forcing or attempting to force a partner to take part in a sex act, sexual touching, or a non-physical sexual event (e.g., sexting) when the partner does not or cannot consent.
- Stalking is a pattern of repeated, unwanted attention and contact by a partner that causes fear or concern for one's own safety or the safety of someone close to the victim.
- Psychological aggression is the use of verbal and non-verbal communication with the intent to harm another person mentally or emotionally and/or exert control over another person.

People are hurting and need to be heard. They need to have their stories listened to. We need the opportunity to see ourselves as whole instead of broken.

In many religious communities, there has been denial, and silencing, blaming, and judging, minimizing, and sanitizing. Some of us come from communities where faith leaders used our sacred text as weapons.

When I looked at the for lectionary today, I said to myself, "This is trash. I can't preach about this." Two of the readings seemed contrary to the message I want to give. It took me a minute of reflection to realize that yes, I could preach from these texts during Domestic Violence Awareness Month.

First there was Genesis 2: 18-24. This was the story of woman being created from Adam's rib. Did anyone fact check that with a woman? In Divinity school I learned there is great debate about precisely what body part was meant by the word translated to "rib," but had they asked a woman... We can guess she would have helped steer the translation a little more accurately.

Through centuries, women have been characterized as Eve, the temptress who came from Adam's rib—a stupid woman tricked by a snake who led the man astray and caused the downfall of all humanity. This foundational image of women has become part of our collective consciousness in many different religions.

The 2nd problematic lectionary reading was Mark 10:2-16, about how much God hates divorce. Can you see why this seemed to conflict with my intentions this morning? But again, I was challenged to not ignore these texts. I spoke to women this week and asked them, "What do we need to hear from

our churches? What do we need to hear from our leaders?" And in response, I heard stories of boys and girls, men and women, who grew up in households where there was violence...who grew up watching their mothers or fathers ask for advice from the religious leaders only to told they needed to do whatever they could to save their marriage, because divorce is a sin. Religious leaders emphasized divorce is a sin, without adding that abuse is a sin, that abuse is what breaks the sacrament and the covenant of marriage. These betrayals have endangered vulnerable people and driven many away from the church.

Perhaps these stories and images might seem irrelevant to us as Unitarian Universalists. After all, we don't hold up the Bible as our primary source of truth. For us, the Bible is but one of six sources of truth, right? But these images and stories still inform our worldview. So many of us grew up with these images. So many people see themselves only in the mirror—but not reflected in our government or in our church pulpits, or in our community organizations.

It's essential for all of us to keep engaging these images and keep talking back to them. To survivors, we say, "I'm so sorry." The Biblical texts reflect the opinions of certain groups of people trying to maintain social control. But however we may define God, or the Divine, or something larger than ourselves, we know they are not God's opinions of women.

Patriarchy was the backdrop for the bible, but it's not the language of the bible. We've all been bystanders consuming objectifying media, not believing women, not interrupting violent speech, not listening to stories, not electing women to positions of power.

We need to encourage one another not to internalize this, to share our stories, and to look between the lines for the images and the role models that we need to bring ourselves and our stories into community, to make them part of the web; this interdependent web that is our expression of our faith, of our connection to something bigger than us, the children and some of the adults here made today.

Our weaving ritual included tattered and torn strips of cloth. We wove them one around the other, making something new and beautiful. The blessing oil beside the loom reminds us that when you come into the community and you weave into this loom of beloved space and beloved church, you are a blessing. You receive a blessing, and you give a blessing.

Sometimes we might think that we're a burden, that our stories are too painful to share, too painful to think about, but this is where we lay our burdens down.

For those sitting in the pews who may worry and wonder, "Have I done something to harm someone?" I remind us who we were yesterday does not define who we are today, and who we can become tomorrow. We remember we are also Universalists. We believe in salvation here in this lifetime. There is always the chance to repair.

Some of us have been abused, some of us may have been an abuser, some of us have sought forgiveness, some of us have worked very hard on healing, and we speak out to make room for others to also heal.

When we say, "I believe you," then we line up our actions with our beliefs. We take in the tattered threads, and we bind them together with our own, and we make something beautiful.

I used to think Domestic Violence and Intimate Partner Violence were something that only happened in religious communities where people believe, for instance that God hates divorce no matter what, that women came from the rib of a man. Now I know it isn't so. Congregants in Unitarian Universalist congregations report abuse at the same rate as members of every other faith tradition. Abusers come from every faith or absence of faith. Even in our own tradition, trusted clergy have harmed their own congregants. There are entire specialties of Unitarian Universalist ministers who are called After Pastors, who travel to different churches to help them heal after misconduct happens there.

Remember: abusers are smart, charming, talented, popular, often well-loved people. They're the ones we know, not the strangers. Even here, even in this place of reason, and love, and beloved community, among us there may be people who are looking to change their hearts.

We pray together as witnesses, as bystanders, as survivors, that we continue to rise up and push through fear—that we don't remain silent. We give prayers for hope, and healing, and responsibility.

We offer our stories as a calling for all of us to notice one another, to notice changes in our behavior, notice who might not be showing up anymore, and who we may need to reach out to.

Sometimes people are not believed, and we say again over and over again, "We believe you." And If I believe you, then I must align my actions with my belief. I must support lifespan education like what we have here in this church: religious education that demonstrates we want all of our children to be conditioned to be strong, and courageous, decisive, and proactive. We need to inspire and train more OWL teachers and keep working with our beloved religious education teachers—who teach that there is a full range of expression for gender and a full range of expression for healthy sexuality. We know that our safety is not a women's issue. We work to exercise our privilege to promote and elevate, to lift and center marginalized voices. We listen to survivors. In this church, we admit "I don't know" is perfectly legitimate and honorable. We show up to have conversations like Reverend Nathan is convening with men after worship on the 21st to explore anew the role of men in standing up and calling out other men who act in sexually inappropriate ways toward other women and men.

It's ok to vulnerably ask "what can I do?" and to share: "Here's what I've learned. Here's how I've grown." We remain teachable, and we share our on-going learning together. We pray by moving our hands and our feet, because community is our principle of interdependence. It's how we respond to violence, and oppression, where we rise above the myths of individualism and independence.

We respect the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part, because we know that our lives and our hearts are bound up together like the fabric on the loom. This is the spirit of our lives and the ground of our being. We dedicate our shared community life to justice, and healing, and hope together. And so it is.