Love Without Exceptions

November 17, 2019

The First Parish in Lincoln

Rev. Jenny M. Rankin

Readings: Matthew 25; “A Blessing Called Sanctuary” by Jan Richardson

“I think many of us hardly know how hungry we are

To be gathered in . . . .

Until we are gathered in,” say the words in our reading,

And so, for me, Sundays like this one

When we welcome new members

Are a joyful and a hopeful day

I know what it was for me as a young adult to find a spiritual community

During a time of difficulty, depression and change in my life.

That sense of belonging, of being held, meant everything.

Church helped me to heal, reground, reorient, make friends.

I listen to you speak

About what place *this* community holds in *your* heart

In your life.

Of what it means to you to find a sense of belonging

In a noisy, chaotic, often unsettled world.

What it means to you to be part of something where

No part of ourselves is left behind.

We are asked to leave nothing at the door,

To bring our whole selves in.

“Nothing of you

Found foreign or strange

Nothing of your life

That you were asked

To leave behind

Or to carry in silence

Or in shame.”

What an amazing gift—

The blessing of sanctuary.

I think it’s always worth asking the question

“How are we doing at extending that kind of unconditional welcome?”

And figuring out how we are going to gather the data we need to give that an honest answer.

So, if I were a person for whom gender binary (man/woman, brother/sister) didn’t really work

What clues might I get here,

From the website, the order of service, the brochures,

That this community understood

“Got me”

What if I was gay, transgender, coming from another religion or country or culture

Divorced, single parent,

Someone with mental health issues or financial issues or legal issues

If I were someone in recovery for substance abuse

Or someone in my family was dealing with that

What kind of clues would I get that I’d be able to bring all of that with me here?

(I remember seeing the website of a UCC church in Northampton Mass and one of the headings on the menu bar of the website was “Recovery Groups.” That gives a clear signal as to *one* of the things that community is about.)

I’m grateful that you are thoughtfully exploring

Some of these questions

And trying to figure out

Who you need to talk to

And what questions you need to ask

To get some good data on how you are doing.

What does it mean to welcome in someone in the entirety of all that they are?

What does it mean to offer a blessing called sanctuary?

With that as an introduction

I want to tell you a story

It’s a story from our tradition

And it’s a story about welcoming and a Love without Exceptions.

Once upon a time

There was a young man born into a large family in England in 1740

As a young man, he became a Methodist minister

But then converted to Universalism

Influenced by the English Universalist preacher James Relly.

In the 1760s in England this was heretical stuff—

After all, Universalists preached a loving God who would save everyone in the end

He married and had a son, but when the boy was one, the baby died,

And soon after that, Murray’s wife died too.

He got word that 4 of his siblings had died as well

He fell into debt, was thrown into prison.

It was a terrible time. A devastating time.

All that he had known and loved most was lost.

It seemed as if his life had come to pieces around him in the blink of an eye.

Perhaps some of us here have known that to happen in our own lives

Or in the life of someone we love

Perhaps we’ve a glimmer of what it means to live with

That kind of discouragement, loss, even despair.

Eventually, he got out of prison

Boarded a ship bound for America

He was determined to put his former life behind him

Start again

He vowed he would lose himself in the wilds of America and never preach again.

Now little did he know that waiting for him on the eastern shore of southern New Jersey

In a place called Barnegat Bay

Was a man named Thomas Potter.

Potter was a farmer, a fisherman, a mystic.

And for some reason, about 10 years before,

He’d been moved to build a little chapel in the woods near his house.

Now, Potter was a simple man. A working man.

He couldn’t read but he was possessed with a kind of powerful, innate religious feeling

A sensitivity to the divine, you might call it, to mystery, to grace

Thomas Potter believed ibn a God who loved each and every person, each and every creature.

(Remember this was in the 1700s when Calvinism was still in full swing. This is heretical stuff!)

Potter had a kind of simple innate faith

And so, he built this little wooden chapel in the woods with his own hands and then he waited for a preacher who would come and preach about the God he believed in

Over the years he invited preacher after preacher to come

They came

They spoke

But none of them preached words about the God of Love that Potter was waiting to hear.

When John Murray’s ship got to America,

It ran aground on a sand bar in Barnegat Bay

Murray got off the ship and went ashore to try and find some help

And who should he meet but this very man Thomas Potter.

“You are the man I’ve been waiting for all these years,” proclaimed Potter

(Or so the story goes)

He invited Murray to preach.

Murray declined, saying

“You’ve got the wrong man. I’m done with all that. I’ve come here to get away from my old life.”

Potter persisted.

He kept on asking,

Murray kept on saying “no.”

Finally, the two men made a bargain.

“If the wind doesn’t change before this coming Sunday,”

Potter said,

“And your ship stays stuck,

Would you be willing to preach in my chapel?”

Well, Murray was probably just plain tuckered out by all the arguing

He relented and said “yes.”

He was convinced that, by then, the wind HAD to shift

And that by Sunday, he would be long gone.

But lo and behold, Sunday came

The wind did not change

The ship was still stranded on the sandbar

John Murray, reluctant as ever but a man of his word

Was forced to keep his part of the bargain.

And so he found himself standing where he had vowed he would never stand again—

In a pulpit—preaching--

He found himself standing in a rough wooden chapel in a forest just a few steps from the seashore

Speaking about a God of Love he had almost forgotten

A God he felt had abandoned him in his time of trouble

But somehow now, was close to him again.

In his sorrow and despair, in fact, it had been Murray who turned away from God

But coming back into that little wooden place

He found that God had never turned away from him.

Filled with the spirit, filled with a sense of the love and the presence of God

He began to preach again.

We cannot know of course exactly what happened on that day

Bu surely something did

In that God forsaken marshland where land meets sea

Because something was kindled inside John Murray that day and he was never the same again

It was as if a match struck tinder and a spark was lit

And his own felt sense of God’s presence

Which had been dampened by his own experience of sorrow

The god he had himself rejected--

It was as if a veil was lifted

And he was in direct contact again with that Divine Source

What Paul Tillich once called the Ground of All Being.

His own personal experience of a God who was loving, present, real

Who was with him even when in the words of Psalm 42

The “tides and billows had gone over him”

And his experience of this was so powerful

That he felt moved to share the good news

Of this God who stayed with him

Even when he was in prison

Grieving

Sick to his soul

Without money

Or family

Or work

Or anything.

“I was hungry and you gave me food

I was in prison and you visited me”

He began to preach again and became an itinerant preacher

Travelling up and down the eastern seaboard

Now although that was probably a powerful day in his life

And something was kindled that day

Truth be told

His road back

To himself

To health and strength

Was a whole lot longer than that.

And that’s the way it usually is for us too.

Healing—

Transformation—

Change

Doesn’t happen overnight.

It is a long and winding and often slow and painful process.

I was lucky enough to be able to visit that spot in New Jersey where Murray landed so long ago and it was while I was there, walking that land, speaking with the people who live there, that I realized Murray stayed on that spot of land for four whole years.

He would go out to preach and then return to that little spot of land on Barnegat Bay where Potter lived

It was there he read, and re-read letters from his dead wife

It was there that he grieved, struggled, prayed and rested.

It was there that he wrestled with the demons that had sent him flying across the sea to America in the first place.

And little by little, over time,

Something happened inside of him

As indeed perhaps it has happened inside of you, inside of me

When we are wrestling with some trouble or difficulty

Something happened—a strange kind of alchemy perhaps

Transmuting one thing into another

Grief, anger, loss now transformed into something else

Taking some new form or forms in his life

That would help him begin to heal

And grow

And gather the courage to begin again.

In time, John Murray would leave New Jersey

He would marry

A bright and talented woman who is famous in her own right

Judith Sargent Murray

They settled in Gloucester, Mass

And there, in the dark days of the American Revolution,

When Cape Ann was blockaded by the British and people were literally starving

John and Judith and a few women and men began a Universalist congregation

In the beginning they literally give out food to people who were hungry

And found clothes for people who needed them.

That’s what the God they believed in, a God of Love

A God of Mercy

That’s what God called them to do

In that place

And in that time

And so that’s what they proceeded to do.

Living out the words of Matthew 25, “I was hungry and you gave me food, I was naked and you clothed me” in a very practical, very nitty gritty way.

That little church in Gloucester became the first Universalist church in America—the beginning of Universalism on this content.

John Murray had passed through a kind of hell

And came out the other side

To preach not hell but heaven on earth

And a big part of what helped make that happen was that blessed sanctuary Murray found there in that little godforsaken stretch of marshland by the edge of the sea in Barnegat Bay

Where in company with friends and in solitude both he was able to let down

Let go

Be vulnerable

Begin to wrestle his demons to the ground

And begin to heal and grow and find the courage to begin again

To let a new life be grown in him

One that maybe he had never expected or imagined

Or maybe in some ways even wanted

But a new life that was coming nevertheless.

I wanted to tell you this story today because it speaks to me

About a kind of radical welcome

What the Universalists used to call “Love Without Exceptions.”

There’s something here that to me is a vision for us.

To me, this is a kind is a vision of what our congregations can be in this world

A place where we invite one another in

The stranger

The lonely

The lost

The seeking

The discouraged

And sometimes that means me

And sometimes that means you

Sometimes that means someone who hasn’t walked in the door yet

Someone who may not even know we exist

We invite one another in

To this blessing called sanctuary

That we somehow found our way to

And now we work hard together to make sure that this place stays sturdy and strong

So, it will be a sanctuary for others

So, they too will feel that healing blessed balm of a place

Where you are accepted and loved exactly as you are

No part left outside the door.

How grateful we are for this sanctuary

This place where we can come however we are,

This day, this week, next week, next year

However we are

Whoever we are

Whomever we love

What we believe or don’t believe

The gifts and graces that have come to us

The hard things that have come to us

The twists and turns that Life has taken

The mistakes we’ve made because we are human

And our desire to return

Again and again

To a path that is healthy and hope-filled

A path that leads us on.