

Sermon: We Begin Again in Love (Laurel)

I had a funny conversation with my mom, who is also UU, after the article II recommendations came out last year. She was uncertain about the idea of having an ethic of love at the core of our principles, because it felt wishy-washy to her. She explained that she was the generation of Woodstock and free love and so the word love felt fluffy to her.

I was a little baffled because I was trained by liberation theologians for whom an ethic of love meant risking their lives to stand up to colonial powers and working to reorder the world with a vision of justice and a practice of empowering the outcast.

So those are two very different definitions of love.

Once I explained my definition, my mom had a sort of “oh that makes more sense” response to this idea of holding an ethic of love as the heart of all that we do.

Because what is democracy, what is searching for meaning, what is tending to the inherent worth of humanity without an ethic of love? Our principles fail and fall apart if we don't root them in fertile ground.

But what is love? What does it mean to say that our ethic, the moral principles that govern our behavior, what does it mean to say that our ethic is one of love?

The Dr. Cornel West said that “Justice is what love looks like in public, just like tenderness is what love feels like in private”

If you remember in November we talked about redemptive suffering theology and the authors of the book I was referencing talk a lot about love being counter to redemptive suffering. The Rev. Dr. Rebecca Parker puts it this way in that book:

“Love is neither transcendence nor undifferentiated union. Love is the wisdom of life that knows when connection can heal and when separation will make life flourish. Love is the capacity to use the powers of holding on and letting go in the

service of life. Love is capable of detachment as empathy, differentiation as well as union, hierarchy as well as mutuality. Love is the guardian of powers. Love directs the use of specific powers, in response to particular circumstances, for the sake of creating, sustaining, or healing life...To love is to choose life.” (Proverbs of Ashes p. 198)

So what does it mean if our fundamental moral principles are defined by love?

Here’s another perspective, this one from author, education, and social critic bell hooks in her book “all about love.” Here she’s addressing this idea of a love as an ethic and I particularly appreciate that she addresses the joyfulness of a love ethic, because we so often think about ethics and moral principles as rules that limit and scold us. Not so when it comes to a love ethic:

“Commitment to a love ethic transforms our lives by offering us a different set of values to live by. In large and small ways, we make choices based on a belief that honesty, openness, and personal integrity need to be expressed in public and private decisions...Living by a love ethic we learn to value loyalty and a commitment to sustained bonds over material advancement...I know no one who has embraced a love ethic whose life has not become joyous and more fulfilling. The widespread assumption that ethical behavior takes the fun out of life is false. In actuality, living ethically ensures that relationships in our lives, including encounters with strangers, nurture our spiritual growth.” (all about love by bell hooks p. 88)

A life that is more joyous, more fulfilling; a world transformed by integrity and care.

So often this time of year is dominated by the pressure to make new year's resolutions, which are too frequently about making ourselves smaller.

But what if we shifted away from individual self improvement and focused instead on rooting down into our deepest values, so that we’re not improving ourselves, but rather aligning with ourselves and our shared humanity. When I shift my internal voice from a kind of scolding “do better” command and instead try to align

myself with my deepest values, it feels like spaciousness and care instead of scolding and restriction.

Maybe a love ethic isn't quite the language you'd use for yourself, even as our tradition moves in that direction.

So what is the ethic at the heart of your life? As you begin this new year I invite you to wonder about that, to get acquainted with the deep knowing at the heart of your being, to maybe put some words to it, or see if you can feel it in your body. Feel when you're living with integrity and when life is pulling you off-center, so that the path back to the place of alignment is well-trodden and familiar, so that we can find our way home to the place of spaciousness and joy, so that we can begin again in love.

Amen.