

Answering the Call of Love
Sermon Given February 19th, 2017

Opening words:

Come in and know you are welcome.
Come with your wrinkled hands and blemished faces
And know you are welcome
Come with your tired feet and strained muscles.
Come with your wheelchairs and canes and walkers,
Come with your hearing aids and pacemakers.
Come with your racing heart,
And your weary eyes.
Come and know you are welcome
Come and know every body of every types and ability is welcome here
Come and know your body and every body is a holy home, with inherent worth.
Come let us love each other, come let us welcome every body.

I KNOW SOMETIMES YOU WAKE UP FLATTENED

- Reading by Rev. Theresa Soto

I know sometimes you wake up flattened,
And you think that no one does this
But you. It's not true. The storm of
Circumstance, rain, and chemicals in the brain, follows others too.
And that voice, inside, quieter than flowers growing and much more persistent,
tries to tell you that you are bad and you are wrong
and you should shush whatever song you were about to try.
And you feel heavy and somewhat sad or somewhat bland.
I get it. But here's what I need you to know.
You are both imperfect and glorious.
And this. This is more true than a one-sided story
In which none of your shine is allowed to appear.
And there are people who love you for more than just the things you do.
They love the inside you. And even when it's hard to shine your own life onto yourself

I'm asking you to tend one spark. To hold it close and watch it with gentle curiosity.
You are the gift. You are the goodness.
It's okay to sometimes lose your train of thought, your line of being fine.
Relax and trust that the persistence of the sadness is not more true, than all the rest of the story of you.

Sermon:

I know sometimes you wake up flattened.

I love this poem, because it hits right at the heart of a universal element of being human, the very physical experience of not being enough.

Everyone's experience is different. You feel it for yourself, what it is like to carry disappointment, joy, happiness, what it is like to be flattened. Maybe it's a drop in your shoulders, a tension behind your knees, a strain in your side, a pain in your forehead. Whatever it is, you can feel in your body what it is like to be flattened, to feel that you are not enough. We can pinpoint in our bodies what that feels like. And sometimes feeling like we aren't enough is because of our bodies.

We live a culture and society that values an ideal body image, youth, strength. These cultural norms indicate what our bodily flaws are, and physically remind us we are not enough. Everyone in the room can think of their body's problem's. Maybe we have too much weight, not enough height, not enough curves, not clear skin. The pressures of our society creates the idea that our bodies have problem.

But for those who go through the day with relatively "normal" embodied experience, like normal heart rate, relative mental health, and "normalized" bodily integrity, we never question how we move through the world. We might have body problem, but nothing and no one tells us that our body itself is the problem.

Those with disabilities, both visible and invisible, however are constantly bombarded with the feelings that their bodies are the problem. When a person who uses wheelchair can't access the restroom, when someone who is blind is told again that dogs aren't allowed, when someone who is deaf is being yelled at by people asking why they can't hear, their bodies are being called the

problem and told they are not enough. The assumptions, microaggressions, and daily physical interactions people with disabilities go through that tell them in little and not so little ways their body doesn't measure up, doesn't fit, or doesn't have room is endless. And this doesn't just happen to people with visible or easily recognized disabilities. Mental, emotional, or not as visible health issues are bombarded with the assumptions that their bodies "should" work just as any other able bodied person, because it looks that way. For example, people with heart problems are asked about why they can't keep up in physical exertion by strangers, or people with different mental capabilities are asked why they can't read, or write, or speak in a neurotypical or "normal" way.

The ways in which our culture and society perpetuates the understanding that the "normal" body is the fully able body is called Ableism. Ableism is a set of practices and beliefs that assign inferior value (worth) to people who have developmental, emotional, physical or psychiatric disabilities. Like most isms, it might not be perceived or be recognized as intentional. It might not even be noticed by those who are relatively able, but it doesn't mean it's not there. Ableism is everywhere, from the government buildings whose only wheelchair ramp is located in the back service entrance, to the ways people are judged by other.

Ableism is not just a feeling or judgement, but a nation-wide system of injustice. To take a look of the effects of disability, here are some statistics. Of the 69.6 million families in the US, 20 millions families have a member who is disabled. Disabled Americans are the largest minority in the US, and the only minority that anyone of us will at some point in our lives enter. (Because all of us are only temporarily abled bodied persons). The poverty rate for people with disabilities: 47%. That is mostly because only 35% of people with at least one disability who are of working age actually have a job. Take that in comparison to the 78% of non-disabled individuals who have do have a job. 1 in 3 employers say that they do not hire people with disabilities because the cannot perform required job tasks.

Having disabilities affects children as well as adults. 90% of children worldwide who have a disability to not attend school. I think this last important to note, because of recent government conversations about education. Only a few weeks ago when Betty DeVos was being asked about government funds going to private and charter schools. She was directly asked whether she would make sure the schools that received government funds would be approved by the ADA for accommodations for those with disabilities. She said "government funds come with strings attached", and never addressed whether she would make sure that happened. However, you can hear in her language, where she believes the "problem" lies.

When our government, culture, and society tells people that their bodies are a problem, it is vital that our religious institutions remind us all that no physical body is a problem. As Unitarian

Universalists, we believe in the inherent worth and dignity of every person, and have religious services, worship, and community that emphasizes the ways we welcome every person. We have incredible programs like AIM certification, which help to ensure that congregations are accessible. Yet, I think it is vital to go even further, and make sure we remind each other to love our bodies. That all our bodies are welcome here. That no body takes up too much or too little space, or takes too much or too little attention. Whether mental, emotional, or physical, everyone's abilities are just that - different kinds of abilities. Different ways of joining in and celebrating life. A part of the deep love Unitarian Universalism advocates, means reminding everyone's bodily experience, that they are enough.

However, even with the best intentions, our religious language and worship can perpetuate ableism, and convey that people aren't enough. A great example of this happened to a dear colleague of mine Rev. Theresa Soto. For ministers entering preliminary fellowship, there is a large celebration every year at General Assembly, marking the transitions through different stages of ministry. Rev. Theresa Soto, after having entered preliminary fellowship and having been ordained, was invited to take part in the service this past June. However, when reading the order of service she found hymns like Rank by Rank Again we Stand, Guide My Feet while I Run this Race, and Standing on the Side of love. Theresa has cerebral palsy, and in that moment felt like this service that was meant to honor her along with all her colleagues, had forgotten about her and her body. That day, she was debating whether or not to take part. But instead, she did something that asked our faith to broaden its understanding of love. She joined the service, and carried a sign saying Ouch with her. Everytime able-bodied language was being mentioned, she reminded people that she was there, that her ministry mattered, and that our language limits the welcome we intended to offer.

As in her poem, while I cannot speak for her, I cannot help but imagine that in the moments discovering the order of service, Rev. Theresa might have felt flattened. She might have felt like our faith was telling her her body wasn't enough.

But that never stopped her from shining. She challenged the notion that her body wasn't enough, and instead reminded our Unitarian Universalist faith that every single body is enough, is needed, and loved, and valued for the ministry of faith our bodies provide.

Just as she says in her poem we read,
"But here's what I need you to know.
You are both imperfect and glorious.
And this. This is more true than a one-sided story
In which none of your shine is allowed to appear"

Rev. Theresa continues to let her ministry shine, that's for sure. Every week or so, Rev. Theresa posts a selfie on social media with a large smile on her face, with the tag "Theresa loves you".

What would it be for our UU faith to do just that? To be able to remind every person and every body that they are loved? To believe not only in the inherent dignity of the person, but of the body? The dignity of our unclear skin, our imperfect legs, our wrinkled faces, our racing hearts? Let's take our own selfies. Let's remind everyone that we love our bodies, and every body, and that every body deserves love, dignity, and respect, and to be seen as whole people.

Today is Standing on the Side of Love Sunday in our Unitarian Universalist denomination. Churches across the country are talking about social justice issues that focus on love, justice, and reconciliation. But today, I want to shift that to "answering the Call of Love" Sunday. The term Answering the Call of Love, comes from the original author of the hymn Standing on the Side of Love, who changed the lyrics himself to be more inclusive of people of different abilities. He mentioned in his sermon, In Body or in Spirit, He says that Answering the Call of Love more closely describes what he wanted to say with the song. We might not know that "side" of love we are supposed to be on. We don't have all the answers. But we are called to love more and more, and answer that call with all we are able to do.

I want to embody the love we advocate for, by challenging the words like stand, march, or run. You don't need to be able to stand up to advocate for change. You don't need to be able to march to do justice and shape our world in our image of love. Everybody of every ability can take part in social justice and social change, and no one way is more important.

Instead, I want us to imagine what it would love like to shape love together by loving our bodies and ourselves. By answering a call of love that goes beyond actions, and should, to how we can be together, be in our embodied selves. We can't eradicate able bodied language in one service or in one day, but we can be more aware and more welcoming of bodies.

We as a community have made spaces in our worship, in our community, and in our hearts and lives for bodies of all abilities. And there is still more work to do, which we will do together when we remember that people aren't problems. Bodies aren't problems. And our imperfections, our skin, or ligaments, or blood vessels, or eyes, are beautiful and holy just as they are.

May we answer the call of love, to broaden our understanding of inclusion.

For this is more true than any one sided story. We are glorious, we are imperfect, and we are shaping our world in our image of love.