

Standing on the Side of Love

February 14, 2010

Rev. Jim Sherblom

First Parish in Brookline

Reading: *The Romance of Christianity*

Rev. Scotty McLennan

As a teenager, I found that romantic feelings were my most powerful experience of love. Daydreaming in school, reading novels, going to movies, and talking to friends – it was this form of love that really hit home. Valentine’s Day came to symbolize love.

Eventually I learned that Saint Valentine’s Day actually began in commemoration of a third-century Christian priest who was martyred in Rome. By the Middle Ages, Saint Valentine had been associated with the union of lovers under conditions of stress. By the 20th century his holiday was being celebrated with the widespread exchange of romantic little messages called valentines.

As a minister, I began to see the evolution of Saint Valentine’s Day this way: It begins as a commemoration of *spiritual love*, later becomes a celebration of *committed interpersonal love*, and is now primarily a rather commercialized carnival of *romantic love* ... I’m convinced there needs to be a thoroughgoing connection between romantic love, committed partnership, and spiritual love ... The essence of true love is mutual recognition – two individuals seeing each other as they really are.

Reading: *The Minister and the Drug Dealer*

Rev. McLennan

A minister I know used to visit a drug dealer in prison every week for a year – a teenager named Gene who was also a thief and a liar. As the minister described it in writing, “We talked about prison, parents, children; we talked about Darwin, Newton, Einstein; we talked about life, love, hope and truth. We were never aware of the holy in our midst.

“(Then Gene) enrolled as a special student at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (and) became a full-time student in chemistry ... When he graduated with honors from MIT, I was thanked by his father, by his mother, and by Gene himself. It was pleasant to receive the accolades. But how the stone had been moved from the cave’s entrance was impossible to tell.”

A resurrection is always a mystery – though it happens every day. All this minister did was express his love in action. The transformation for the drug dealer appears to have

been love received and accepted. But it was a resurrection, and it happens every day if our hearts are open.

Reading: *The Religious Left*

Rev. McLennan

We are the religious left. But what do we stand for? Not all of us share exactly the same perspective, of course, but we tend to be identifiable by many of the following principles: The Bible is meant to be read largely metaphorically and allegorically, rather than literally. Science and religion are compatible; we are committed to the use of logic, reason, and the scientific method. Doubt is the handmaiden of faith. Love is the primary Christian value, and is directly related to the promotion of liberty and justice in society at large. All people are inherently equal and worthy of dignity and respect. Free religious expression should be governmentally protected, but no particular tradition should be established as the state religion.

There are many roads to the top of the spiritual mountain, and Christianity is only one of them. Interfaith understanding and tolerance are critical. We see Jesus primarily as a spiritual and ethical teacher and less as being identical to God. Living a fulfilled and ethical life here and now is more important than speculating on what happens to us after we die. Nonviolence is strongly preferred in relationships between human beings, groups, and nations. Women and men must play an equal role in religious leadership. And in terms of current American hot-button issues, we tend to be pro-choice on abortion and in favor of marriages for same-sex couples.

Sermon

My message this morning is, we need to make friends, and then be bold in pursuing our principles!

The Rev. Scotty McLennan became a good friend of my family through the justice work he and my wife Loretta were doing at the UU Urban Ministry in the early 1990s. Scotty was the chaplain at Tufts University in those days, and used to invite me, as an ethical entrepreneur and Harvard Business School grad, to attend the ethics class he taught at HBS.

So one morning in early 1999, over breakfast at an Arlington café, Scotty was helping me discern what more the universe was calling me to be, beyond my being a socially responsible entrepreneur and an ethical venture capitalist, though Scotty did mention that the world needs more of those.

The week following our breakfast conversation, while I pondered my next incarnation, a postcard arrived from my dad's old seminary, Andover Newton Theological School, inviting me

to spend a day on the hill. I spent a Saturday with the faculty and students, and when we were done I called Loretta to tell her I was enrolling in the Master of Divinity program there. She gave a long pause, not having planned to be a minister's wife when she married me two decades earlier, and then she said that I should follow my heart. Scotty swears he didn't tell ANTS about me, but his insights helped frame my response. So I pay attention when Scotty, now the chaplain at Stanford University, has something to say about life. His book *Jesus Was a Liberal*, the source of today's readings, is a call to responsible religion.

As a liberal Christian, Scotty views Jesus as an avatar, which he describes as a person with mystical awareness who has "direct knowledge of the infinite spirit that infuses the universe." As Scotty says in his book, "Many liberal Christians like me see Jesus as the Son of God only in the sense described by the apostle Paul in Romans 8:14: 'All who are led by the spirit of God are children of God.' Jesus was surely led by the Spirit of God in a very special way... as a mystic who also had extraordinary abilities as prophet, healer, and wisdom teacher. Yet, personally, I don't believe that Jesus was or is identical with God, nor do I think that's what he believed either, based upon biblical evidence."

Why does it matter what we believe about God and Jesus? For Scotty to be the chaplain at the religiously diverse Stanford University, or for us to engage in transformative social justice work alongside the 60 million liberal Christians and Jews in this country, it is important that we be clear about what we believe, in order to be a partner with integrity when we join in work with others.

Our positions on a woman's right to choose and an embryo's right to life need to be informed by our faith. Our support of the fundamental right of same sex couples to marry wins more allies when it is based upon our religious affirmation of the inherent worth and dignity of every person, the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process in society at large, and our goal of world community with peace, liberty and justice for all. The rainbow banner on our tower is a religious symbol. Our actions in the world derive from religious belief, and we do have something to contribute to our larger society's debates on these fundamental questions. As one of Scotty's Stanford undergrads expresses it: "There's a river of spirit deep within each of us that can't be named, that's completely non-denominational, and that doesn't require any labels like 'God' and Jesus.' There's no one right way to find that river and get into its flow."

I say if we wish to be relevant, we must be willing to jump into the current and learn how to swim together.

Scotty, building on the interfaith theology of Wilfred Cantwell Smith, reminds us: "We now live in a thoroughly pluralistic reality, radically different from that of our ancestors, who never knew much beyond their Shinto or Taoist or Christian contexts. As Smith notes, 'We are learning each

other's languages, both literally and figuratively.' We have an increasing common consciousness of the world around us. We are faced with the challenge to collaborate in building and saving a world very much at risk from environmental desolation and nuclear destruction, not to mention various holy wars and genocides. It's ultimately global suicide for us to speak in terms of 'we' versus 'they,' rather than in terms of a worldwide 'we' (albeit within 'we' there's enormous and precious diversity). It's no longer possible to develop Christian, Muslim or Hindu theologies without taking into account the other traditions and their understandings and insights." This is why we teach our 7th graders Neighboring Faiths, and why Rev. Martha and I so often bring these other major religious perspectives into our common worship here. We are preparing ourselves to be part of this pluralistic worldview, where our voices can join with the voices of other liberally religious in seeking justice in this world.

Some of you know that I spent five years earlier this decade on the Board of Common Cathedral, where Episcopal, UCC, and UU congregations come together in worship with the homeless on Boston Common. It is imperative that we stand together with the poor and the oppressed. When we speak up for the oppressed, we aren't expressing merely our own personal preferences. When we challenge unjust social systems or unfair societal structures, these are not just reflections of our personal choices, but a reflection of our own deeply felt religious conviction. We as a people, as a matter of principle, seek legislation and regulations which will increase the economic opportunity for all.

Like the late UU minister Forrest Church, we rest our faith upon the U.S. Declaration of Independence, which begins, "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." We speak for social justice as true American Patriots.

In the early 1990s, when my wife and Scotty served together on the board of UU Urban Ministry, Loretta was appalled at the quality of education provided to inner-city poor people of color. The Urban Ministry offered an after-school study program, but amid the rise of gang violence in the inner city, one of the most promising of the young men, Damien Funderburg, was killed in a gang-related shooting.

The drop-out rate for young people of color was off the charts, so Loretta joined with other UUs to offer more tutoring to increase the likelihood that these youth would graduate from high school. That program worked, but these young people graduated from high school with no prospect for college or good jobs, and fell back into the poverty trap for the inner-city poorly educated. So nine years ago Loretta started Funderburg Scholars, to find mentors for these young people, to encourage them and help them apply to college, and then to raise the money

necessary to help them buy books, computers, and other necessities to complete a college education.

Because these kids come from poor families, they are eligible for college and government grants and loans, but still they often need another \$3,000 to \$5,000 annually to stay in college. That money is far beyond what they and their families can afford.

The Funderburg Scholars are beginning to have their first college graduates taking good jobs and building a different life than they could have imagined when the program began nine years ago. The program has eight students in college now with another four or five going in the fall to good colleges, including one to Bucknell on a full scholarship.

It is amazing to me the impact a relatively small amount of money and a lot of liberal faith can have on these young people's futures. You may have thought Scotty's story of the young thief and liar turning his life around to graduate with honors from MIT was a dream; so did I, but now I know that such dreams can happen, and do, when we work for justice in these young people's lives.

Such dreams can come true if our hearts are truly open, and if we are willing to stand on the side of love!

At a dinner recently, one of these college students told me that the Funderburg program paid off a \$380 bursars bill for him so that he could stay in school and register for classes. Without this, he said, he would have had to drop out of college. But even more important than the money, he said, was knowing that smart, college-educated people thought him capable of graduating from the University of Massachusetts-Amherst, something no one in his family or neighborhood thought possible. When the going is hard, he said, he keeps on because someone believes in him.

A young woman in the program told me that when she graduates with her degree from Northeastern, she hopes to earn a Masters in counseling, so that she can be an inner-city public school guidance counselor to help those still trapped in inner city poverty. This is what it means for us to stand on the side of love!

When we call our nation to environmental stewardship and taking serious action on climate change, we do so from a religious perspective of our interrelationship with the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part. We preach about global warming because it is our generation who must act for the world to survive.

We say, with Albert Schweitzer, that a person can be truly "ethical only when life, as such, is sacred to him, that of plants and animals as that of his fellow man, and when he devotes himself

helpfully to all life that is in need of help.” We stand along with the Jewish thinker Martin Buber to affirm that “every thing and being” should be respected as a Thou, as part of the holy, and that this relationship should be extended to trees, rocks, and soil as well as the many diverse and strange human beings.

People who hold similar religious convictions, whether as secular humanists, Protestants, Catholics, or Jews, make up over 40 percent of the United States population. Scotty calls us to find our common voices for justice through working together, and to make our voices heard in contrast to “that 40 percent of Americans [who] want to replace evolution with creationism in our public school science curriculum.” Or those who believe in a literal reading of the Bible, or who use it to advocate against a woman’s right to choose, or for a woman’s domination by her husband, or to stir up hatred against homosexuals. These less than compassionate views are not yet held by the majority of Americans, but they are held by a surprisingly large and loud minority, such that if we do not find common cause with like-minded religious liberals soon, we may become a minority position in America.

We don’t ask for any particular intellectual affirmations to join us, but we do expect a commitment of heart and hands. The Unitarian Universalist Association has declared today, February 14, *National Standing on the Side of Love Day*, for confronting oppression and standing together with the vulnerable and marginalized among us.

Our congregation joins with many others across the country in this re-imagining of Valentine’s Day. Our message of love and inclusion calls us to act on behalf of those in need, because our love cannot be fully actualized unless it also includes those who are oppressed. Those communities who are most oppressed, and in this country they are mostly Christians, are in the greatest need of our love, our voices, and our action.

Standing on the Side of Love Day helps us restore the voices of those who don’t often have a voice. In all the world’s religions, love is upheld as a central tenet. We seek to harness the unifying and transformative power of love to stop oppression, feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and heal the sick among us.

A member of this congregation, Reita Ennis, and I spent much of last weekend at MIT with a large group of mostly Episcopalian religious liberals at a conference on “Building an Ethical Economy.” It appears the Episcopalians are still ahead of the UUs in terms of thinking about and mobilizing for economic justice. We ought to stand shoulder to shoulder on behalf of the poor and oppressed. We may find, as we did with the Congregationalists in developing our sex education materials and fighting for same sex marriage in Massachusetts, that we are far stronger with our liberal religious allies than we could ever be on our own. This is a major message of

Scotty's book for me: We need each other when we enter the marketplace of ideas if we hope to transform our society consistent with our ideals.

You may feel like I am calling you to be an activist for our faith. I am.

You may feel like I am becoming an extremist for love. Perhaps so.

You may feel uncomfortable being asked to stand shoulder to shoulder with other religious liberals, many of whom may worship in ways that are foreign or uncomfortable for you, And so am I.

As the Revolutionary War saying goes, "we must choose now to stand together or else we will surely hang alone." Martin Luther King Jr., in his "letter from a Birmingham jail," wrote: "Though I was initially disappointed at being categorized as an extremist, as I continued to think about the matter I gradually gained a measure of satisfaction with the label. Was not Jesus an extremist for love (saying): 'Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which persecute you.' Was not Amos an extremist for justice, (calling out) 'Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream ...' Was not Martin Luther an extremist (for faith) saying : "Here I stand; I cannot do otherwise, so help me God..." And Thomas Jefferson, writing: 'We hold these truths to be self evident, that all men are created equal...' So the question is not whether we will be extremists, but what kind of extremists we will be. Will we be extremists for hate or love? Will we be extremists for the preservation of injustice, or for the extension of justice?"

So I ask you, who will you stand with today? I urge us all to stand on the side of love with all those willing to stand with us, as long as we are willing to also stand with them.

I end with these words of invitation from recently ordained UU minister Angela Herrera: "Don't leave your broken heart at the door: bring it to the altar of life. Don't leave your anger behind, it has high standards and the world needs vision. Bring them with you, and your joy, and your passion. Bring your loving, and your courage, and your conviction. Bring your need for healing and your powers to heal. There is work to do, and all that we need to do it is here. So let us... reach beyond the walls of this church. Let us fill this sanctuary with love and then harness its power to stop oppression. Let us join together in worship and together let us stand on the side of love."

I love you all dearly. Amen and Blessed Be.