

## **LOVED INTO FREEDOM**

**A sermon as part of the 'What We Believe' series**

**by the Rev. Dr. Kelly Murphy Mason**

**at UU Wellesley Hills on**

**Sunday, April 14th, 2019**

**Today a family in this faith community invited us to share its joy at the arrival of a new life and allowed us the privilege of dedicating their child in our Sanctuary. We had the additional delight of dedicating the child of a child who was raised here in UU Wellesley Hills, and so became witnesses to a special span of generations in this place. The custom of presenting a child is one that reaches back millennia, linking to the Jewish tradition of presenting the firstborn to the priests in the temple. Of course, most religions have their own ways of recognizing newborns and we Unitarian Universalists have ours, too.**

**What our Child Dedication Ceremony illustrates and celebrates is the mutuality of our covenantal faith. A congregation blesses a child and that same child blesses the congregation. We honor the centrality of family life, but call on the community to support that family in raising a child who belongs to a larger humanity, as well. These days, as religious participation declines across nearly all segments of America, that larger sense of belonging has been jeopardized. Congregations feel it; families feel it; children feel it. Something is being lost, and something needs to be reclaimed by people of every age.**

**In his book Life of the Beloved: Spiritual Living in a Secular World, Dutch priest and religious writer Henri Nouwen notes, “When we are thrown up and down by the little waves on the surface of our existence, we become easy victims of our manipulative world, but when we continue to hear the deep gentle voice that blesses us,” he observes, “we can walk through life with a stable sense of well-being and true belonging.” His slim volume was written for a dear friend of his, Fred, a New York City reporter and a cultural Jew who asked Henri to write something spiritual “for secular men and women wondering what life is all about after all.”**

**So Henri attempts to convince Fred and his peer group, “people no longer accustomed to the traditional language of Church or Synagogue”, people who question “whether there is anything in our world that we can call ‘sacred’”, of their foundational identity as the Beloved. Note that the B in Beloved is capitalized. “We are intimately loved long before our parents, teachers, spouses, children and friends loved or wounded us. That’s the truth of our lives,” Henri insists to Fred. We need only to have that truth uncovered. As he explains, “The voice that calls us the Beloved will give us words to bless others and reveal to them that they are no less blessed than we.”**

**Throughout our program year, I have been preaching a sermon series about what we UUs believe, using the Rev. David O. Rankin’s familiar ten-point outline as a guide. His eighth point is this: “We believe in the motive force of love. The governing principle in human relationships is the principle of love, which always seeks the welfare of others and never seeks to hurt or destroy,” he concludes. Holding love as our motive force and guiding principle would naturally lead us**

to regard one another as Beloved. Usually, though, we are far too shy to announce that.

Last Sunday, when the members of this congregation installed me as Senior Minister of UU Wellesley Hills, several clergy colleagues shared this chancel with me and your Minister Emeritus. One of them, the Rev. Robin Bartlett, declared to all assembled: “Love cannot be put to the test.... When anyone tries to tell you who you are, don’t listen... Because nothing and no one else gets to tell us who we are but the one who made us and named us Beloved.” Well and good, but Who might that be, exactly?

To the extent that we UUs will ever have a standard liturgy, we have it in our Child Dedication Ceremony. In what seems a curious twist, parents bring their darling children into our houses of worship and suddenly, in unison, we tell them, “Your children are not your children.” Yet they are not ours, either. Taking verses from Lebanese poets Kahil Gibran’s classic work The Prophet, we proclaim: “They are the sons and daughters of Life's longing for itself.” Note the L in life is capitalized.

Life’s longing for itself has a capital-B Beloved quality, doesn’t it? The yearning and the tenderness are both palpable to us. When I did my chaplaincy training at a Quaker hospital in Philadelphia, one of my assigned wards was Labor and Delivery. When it was not utterly heartbreaking there, it was the happiest spot in the hospital. Often my visits were upbeat, with me briefly checking in on how mother and child were doing, father sometimes standing by. “Welcome to the world,” I would coo at the baby. “It was waiting for you!”

Now I wonder whatever gave me that idea? As the poet Langston Hughes wrote, “The wonder spreads/ Of life, Of life, Of life... When spring/ And life/Are new.” Faced with the young life of an infant freshly arrived, we all gush and squeeze and marvel without feeling embarrassed or self-conscious. Even the children of strangers inspire such sentiments in us. Most of us would not hesitate to believe them Beloved. Perhaps that explains why the readiest formulation we have in our religious lexicon is “Beloved child of God.” But when childhood fades in time, so too does our ready belief and easy embrace of each other.

In our increasingly secular world, it’s not the loss of God-language or the attenuated theological concepts I mind so much as the diminishment of the religious imagination. That we need to reclaim, these days more than ever. In a recent opinion piece calling for moral renewal in our time, New York Times columnist David Brooks suggests that eventually, our individualistic striving proves empty and “the desire for esteem is stripped away and bigger desires are made visible: the desires of the heart (to live in loving connection with others) and the desires of the soul (the yearning to serve some transcendent ideal and to be sanctified by that service)”. After that, he writes, “Only a spiritual life and unconditional love... will do.”

In that mix of spiritual life and unconditional love, we come to know ourselves as Beloved. When Henri and Fred first met, Henri was teaching on the faculty at Yale Divinity School and Fred was the journalist assigned to write a profile of him. Over the course of their friendship, Henri left academia to become a pastor to intentional

community of intellectually disabled people living in Toronto. That choice brought Henri an emotional freedom he had not known before. As he explained to Fred, he had previously heard “voices saying: ‘Prove that you are worth something; do something relevant, spectacular or powerful, and then you will earn the love that you so desire.’” But he saw that earned love is a conditional kind, counterfeit in its way.

The transforming experiences that Henri had with that intentional community convinced him that leading the life of the Beloved was his highest calling. “The real question is not ‘What can we offer each other?’ but ‘Who can we be for each other?’” Henri told Fred. We can always be affirming presences for one another, those who can “say ‘yes’” to another person’s “Belovedness”, without hesitation and without qualification.

Today we live “in a world constantly trying to convince us that the burden is on us to prove that we are worthy of being loved,” Henri explains to Fred. A toxic celebrity culture only compounds that burden. Ultimately, such a burden of proof cannot be borne by any of us. It crushes our spirits; it constricts our souls. “The problem of modern living is that we are too busy — looking for affirmation in all the wrong places? — to notice when we are being blessed,” Henri concludes.

Our faith communities can call our attention to blessing, because “to give a blessing creates the reality of which it speaks... A blessing touches the original goodness of the other and calls forth his or her Belovedness,” Henri observes. Attending his first Bar Mitzvah with

**Fred, Henri is struck not by the rabbinic teaching or the temple rite, but by the heartfelt blessing the boy's parents impart, the affirmation they provide him. They do not affirm who he has been or who he might become, but instead affirm him for who he is — and they ask him to remember that he is loved always. As Henri notes, “We have to affirm each other.”**

**It is not only our children and youth who require sincere affirmation; throughout the years of our lives, we all do. Somehow, though, it's simpler to affirm our youngest. Passover begins this Friday night, and this weekend my husband and I will go to Cambridge for a Seder with our god-daughter and her brother and their parents and aunt and grandmother all gathered around a table. We will sing songs and ask the children a few questions and play hide a piece of wrapped matzo bread for them to find. “And if you would know God... look about you,” Gibran writes later on in The Prophet, “and you shall see [God] playing with your children”.**

**Not everybody has children or grandchildren in their lives, I know; some instead have nieces or nephews or god-children or the children they taught or the ones living in their neighborhood. Children recall something sacred to mind, though, and that's why we do well to make our Child Dedication Ceremony a communal affair in our UU congregation. “Think of yourself as having been sent into the world...” Henri instructs Fred; it's “a way of seeing yourself that is possible if you truly believe that you were loved before the world began... a perception that calls for a true leap of faith!”**

**Now I understand that several of us in this Sanctuary are reluctant to get too far ahead of ourselves in theological speculation, and I have real respect for that reluctance, but we UUs still believe in the “motive force of love” as the “governing principle in human relationships”, as Rev. Rankin explains, and so we can say simply that love brought us into the circle of one another. Beyond that, love alone can hold the place for us there.**

**“Put simply, life is a God-given opportunity to become who we are,” Henri tells Fred, “to affirm our own true spiritual nature, claim our truth, appropriate and integrate the reality of our being,” which is our Belovedness. What might change if we lived that reality? What might change if we proclaimed proudly it, in private and in public?**

**At our Passover Seder this coming weekend, we will tell the Exodus story with dramatic flourish; we will recall the plagues and Pharoah’s defeat and Moses leading the Israelites through the parted Red Sea. But the Exodus story begins much earlier, because just as Moses exited Egypt through the waters, so too did he enter on them. Baby Moses, if you will recall, was placed by his mother in a basket and set in the river, where he floated downstream and was found on the riverbank by Pharaoh’s daughter. An entire people were freed because of Moses, but that was possible because first, in an act of blind faith motivated by unquestioning love, he was freed as an infant.**

**“You can choose to reach out now to true inner freedom and find it ever more fully”, Henri explains in his book, if you know that you were always intended for the life of the Beloved, just as the child we**

**dedicate in our Sanctuary today is intended for that same life. And so we make no claims on the future of this baby; we make no designs on his faith formation, because we already intuit that the currents of our existence will carry all of us to areas we could never have mapped. But we do offer him our blessing on his journey just beginning.**

**His parents have named this child Otto, and we will call him that as he grows in years and wisdom, but we will remember that before today, perhaps even before he was born, he was known and named as one Beloved. As you were, by the way, however long ago you arrived here on earth. As I am, though it embarrasses me a bit to admit it. We are all Beloved. That is the strength and spirit of our belonging, in the Sanctuary and in the wider world. We — each of us — are the Beloved. May we live ever more fully into that life.**

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