

“Only Love”

Rev. Dr. Stephanie May

First Church in Boston

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“Only love is big enough to hold all the pain of this world.”

Sharon Salzberg

When I read the poem “Only Love” by James Crew a couple months ago, I knew it would be how I introduced this month’s theme of love. Sharon Salzberg’s quote that opens the poem conveys a potent hope, a ravenous longing . . . is there anything big enough to hold all the pain of this world?

Big enough to hold the heart ache of a broken relationship? Big enough to hold the cancer diagnosis in your five-year old child? To hold the accelerating losses of species and habitat across the globe? *Is* there anything big enough to hold the murder of a VA nurse protecting a woman shoved to the ground? To hold the terror of immigrants in this moment?

Only love is big enough says Salzberg. Only love is big enough echoes Crew. Only love is big enough to hold us all.

And yet, theologian Rebecca Parker warns us:

“We can lose track of love. Human cruelty can estrange us from it. We can dwell in fear and anger. We can be lost in despair and confusion. We can be cut off from others and isolated in all-consuming self-concern. We can be so hurt that we close off feeling, receiving, or knowing that we are loved, or that life is a good gift.”

And so, sometimes we need to work at staying connected to love. Parker counsels using spiritual practices of prayer, meditation, art, music, or communal worship to help sustain and repair our connection to love. In other words, deliberately work at staying rooted in love.

As an example of the help spiritual practices offer, Parker describes how composed a short prayer and set it to music during a period of anguish in her own life.

*There is a Love holding me.
There is a Love holding all that I love.
There is a Love holding all.
I rest in this Love.*

This, of course, is the song we now sing as part of our ritual of sharing our joys and sorrows. Because we sing *together*, we change the words from “I” to “we”, from “me” to “us”—reshaping Parker’s individual spiritual practice into a communal one we share.

What is this Love we sing?

As I have [preached before](#), I understand Love as the recognition of otherness—of recognizing the inherent dignity and worthiness in other beings. Love calls us to decenter ourselves and to recognize ourselves within a vast web of Life. To be clear, every one of us is also sacred as part of this holy web of Life. Each of us are worthy of love simply because we *are*. You are worthy of love. You are capable of loving.

And . . . love—for self and for others—can be very, very hard.

The Rev. Dr. Jacqui Lewis, a public theologian and New York City minister, describes love as *fierce*. “Love is the call on our lives,” she writes, “And it’s a fierce call, a fierce love.” For Dr. Lewis, fierce love provides a common ground for theists and atheists. In a [podcast interview](#), she explains:

No matter what your faith is, can we talk about love as the ground of our being? Not namby-pamby love, not co-dependent love, not love songs, rom-coms love, like really the kind of love that made Harriet Tubman go back and forth to free people, that made Frederick Douglass a liberator, that made abolition movements happen, the kind of love that made those South African women sit in the street ... The kind of love that made Jonathan jump in front of [Ruby Sales](#) and save her life. This is fierce love, right? It’s courageous love. It’s bold love, it’s risk-taking love. And I think it’s at the heart of all the world’s major religions. And that’s what I want to convert people to, love. Fierce love as a way to order our lives.

To love fiercely is a choice. The Christian tradition in which I was raised spoke of people *hardening their heart*, which is to say people choosing to close oneself off to another, to stop recognizing the humanity and dignity of others. When this hardening happens, love is lost. I fear too many in our nation today are suffering with hardened hearts as we lose sight of one another’s humanity. I see this in the treatment of immigrants and protestors as well as in how we speak of those we believe are doing harm. How do we keep choosing love?

How do we help to foster a love ethic in others, to counter the tides of dehumanizing hatred?

Choosing love is answering the call to be connected to others, to recognize not just the otherness of people beyond oneself, but to also recognize our togetherness. We are not alone. We are part of a much larger organism of care, a living network of interwoven lives. This is the image James Crew depicts in his poem—"I imagine the entire earth/ as one beating heart held in the space/ of this universe, inside a larger body/ we can't fathom".

Sometimes our hearts may swell with a joyful sense of belonging to this larger body of humanity. And sometimes, well, we might feel that the subway car is just way too crowded. We may feel, as I did when commuting this week, where *did* all these people come from!?! Like a holographic picture shifting images with a slight tilt of the hand, how we perceive others can so easily shift. We are annoyed by the simplest slight, disdain starting to rise . . . only to remember, this too is a person. This too is a person worthy of love.

Earlier this week I was feeling utterly overwhelmed. The bitter cold. The heinous news. After a week of reading and research, stories from the past of First Church tangled with questions about our future. I felt untethered. In such moments, the knowledge that I am days away from having to stand here and speak *something* to you . . . can terrify me. What will I say?! And I am here because I love you, I love this church, I love religious life generally and Unitarian Universalism particularly. I am here answering the call to love fiercely by showing up. I am here because I turned to people in my support network who reminded me I am not alone. I am here because I turned to spiritual practices that started to repair my sense of love for the many people all around me; for my own imperfect, sometimes irritable self; and for the frozen, snow-covered world sparkling in the sun.

I'm not perfect. None of us are. Especially not now with all the tensions of a bitterly cold winter, a national landscape jagged with violence and resistance, as well as any number of ongoing concerns of health, relationship, or money in our personal life. It *is* overwhelming. Can anything help us get through it all?

"Only love is big enough to hold all the pain of this world." Only love. Because only love reminds us of all that still matters most. Only love reminds us of the wondrous gifts that deserve our protection—the smiles of children held in a caring embrace, the laughter of co-workers earning not just a fair paycheck but the promise of a better life, or the calling of geese returning in faith to a place of fresh water and ample food. Only a love that will not deny that Life is precious and good can resist hatred and despair. Only a fierce love that risks stepping beyond the isolation of me and mine to connect with others can heal our

divisions. Only a love that reminds us “we are the lifeblood pumped into these veins” of the world can answer all the pain of the world.

There *is* enough love to hold all the pain of the world. But we have to risk answering the fierce call to love. We have to risk choosing an ethic of love that demands we cherish our own precious life *and* that recognizes none of us is alone.

To close this sermon, I have asked Ebonié and Lynne to hand out slips of paper to you. The tech team will also drop the text in the YouTube chat. The paper contains words of confession from the book *Black Liturgies* by Cole Arthur Riley. Confession is a spiritual practice of naming our limits, our longings, and the ways we fall short of our values. In just a moment, I want to invite us to read together the words of confession. And then, I will read the corresponding words of forgiveness, words of assurance that help us to continue on in our efforts to love. As a note, when you hear the word “God” in this liturgy, I invite you to imagine the God of your understanding—perhaps a Divine being, a sacred Energy, or the lifeblood flowing through all that is.

Let us begin:

Confession

Caring God,

We confess that we have not loved this world well. We have not loved ourselves. We have dismissed concepts of love as frivolous and naïve, failing to recognize the wisdom in choosing tenderness and attachment in a society that trains us to exploit one another. We have lost our passions, allowing our days to be consumed with the practical and boring. Our delight has been drained as we try to survive exhaustion.

We confess we are afraid, lacking the courage to risk ourselves on love for fear of losing it. We have taken advantage of those we know will not leave us, withholding affection and allowing them to receive so much more of our hatred than our gratitude. Forgive us. And have mercy on all our charades of heartlessness, that we would claim a life of more than mere survival. That we would love and be loved in return, all our days, in love’s many forms. *Amen.*

Forgiveness

Let your soul receive this rest: Forgive yourself, choosing self-compassion over unlove. Be assured by the divine that, despite our deepest doubts, you are lovable. That you are adored by God, as they look upon your face and swell with delight. May you be forgiven for how you’ve replicated lovelessness in the world. And as you are nourished by

abounding mercy, may you also extend it, remembering that we are healed by both love received and love given.

Amen. Ashe. Blessed Be.

“Only Love” by James Crews

Only love is big enough to hold all the pain of this world.

—Sharon Salzberg

And so I imagine the entire earth
as one beating heart held in the space
of this universe, inside a larger body
we can't fathom, filling with enough
love to lead each of us out of the cave
of our personal pain and into the light—
enough love to lead all humans as one
out of collective fear, rage, and hate
into a place of peace that is found only
within our own hearts, beating in sync
with the pulse of this planet we were
born to inhabit, despite the daily storms
which overtake us and make us forget
we are the lifeblood pumped into these
veins, every particle of love we generate
running into rivers, lakes, and creeks,
evaporating into the air we breathe,
give back, and breathe again.