Martin Luther King Jr. speaks of love as “that force which all of the great religions have seen as the supreme unifying principle of life.” Through the study of love this month we can broaden our ideas about where love exists in our lives, and where it may be missing. We can learn to see love in new ways and places, to use it as a resource for problem-solving, and, perhaps, to begin viewing the people and events in our lives through a lens of love, thereby changing the world.

...and wow! does the world need some changing! From global climate change to election tampering, the list is long. From Black Lives Matter to #MeToo, people are demanding respect and dignity, claiming their rights and throwing off the tyranny of oppression.

That’s what happens when we truly love ourselves. That is the message that Henry David Thoreau expressed in his understanding of Transcendentalist Unitarianism, Mahatma Gandhi in his Hinduism, and Martin Luther King Jr. in his Christianity and love of Jesus. They all track that life-force back to love. Self-love is not beside the point, it is in fact, the point that helps us all claim our power in the world to make it a better one.

It is not inconsequential that these leaders of non-violent change movements were religious men who had spiritual practices that grounded them in their work, kept them aware of their own strengths and weaknesses, and allowed them to form alliances with others. They were no means perfect men. They had their flaws, because, like the rest of us, they were human. Despite of their imperfections and in some cases maybe because of them, they managed to help change the world. I don’t know about you, but I find that terribly inspirational.

Whether we are leading in a family situation with our children and spouse or siblings, or in our place of work, whatever role we play in the system, or at church in any of numerous volunteer roles – the world needs more genuine and loving leaders. I think few of you would argue with me that, if not your own life at the moment, the world is certainly messed up: wars and poverty, environmental devastation, human injustice. These are all problems that require the best in each of us.

Self-love helps us claim our power in the world to make it a better one. In order to lover ourselves that much, we need to know ourselves. And that, as Carl Jung suggested, can be a painful process. He said that “the most terrifying thing is to accept oneself completely.”

Family System’s thinker, Edwin Friedman, says that what a leader needs to know is not so much her followers, but herself. He suggests that leadership is primarily an emotional process — that is, has more to do with love and presence than skill. And what I mean by having to do with love — is that basic biological process — the way we learned from our caregivers to be in the world — the habits of relationship that became ingrained for our own survival, that, now that we’re older, we can choose or reject.

These are the habits which, when we surface them for ourselves, can be terrifying — because they no longer serve, even though we continue to practice them despite our changed circumstances. I wish I knew how it would feel to be free — free from those habits of thought and feeling that keep me from growing into the loving leader that my world so desperately needs. This civil rights anthem was made popular by Nina Simone who in live concerts would improvise lyrics turning the message of hope into positive affirmations for herself and her listeners.
We ignore our own nature at the world’s peril... Our own Henry David Thoreau was a member of the Hedge Club, that circle of Transcendentalists (mostly Unitarians) who came together in the 19th century to talk about German transcendentalism, human nature, and their own lives – these were intellectuals, who turned the power of their minds to their own inner lives, in an effort to make the world just a little bit better. Margaret Fuller, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Frederick Henry Hedge, Theodore Parker, Elizabeth Palmer Peabody, A. Bronson Alcott, Louisa May Alcott, and so many more...

“I went to the woods,” wrote Thoreau, “because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived.” Thoreau describes in excruciating and exquisite detail the moments and hours of his days spent in the woods and his 10’x15’ house. In the essay on Civil Disobedience which is often reprinted in the back of Walden, he ties his own participation, or non-participation, to the Mexican war and slavery he opposes. He reminds us how our daily actions impact the world.

Self-love helps us claim our power in the world to make it a better one. In order to lover ourselves that much, we need to know ourselves. I believe that statement to be true about institutions as well: governments, nations, and congregations. Politically, in this country, as long as the reds blame the blues and the blues blame the reds we can avoid truly accepting ourselves completely, and without that self-knowledge and self-love, we have lost our ground as a leader among nations.

We are all one another’s teachers. “Imagine that everyone in the world is enlightened but you,” said the Buddha, “They are all your teachers, each doing just the right things to help you learn patience, perfect wisdom, perfect compassion.”

We only know how to love ourselves by loving others – we are, as human beings, tied in connection to one another: a baby left alone at birth will die.

On the other hand– if we don’t love ourselves, the dictum to love your neighbor as yourself, wouldn’t be a very generous one, as one of you pointed out to me last week. If I hate myself, and I’m told to love my neighbor as myself – then, I will hate my neighbor. In fact, that is what I believe many, many people who hate and commit hate crimes are doing. They are turning their hatred of themselves out onto the world. Especially these tragic shootings we experience so frequently in America – at a Las Vegas concert, a Florida Nightclub, a Connecticut elementary school.

Religion helps people make meaning out of such tragedies. A belief in God and God’s Love is one way people can muster courage in such a dire and dangerous world.

‘Embodied theology of relation’ is what I named my grounding belief in seminary. I don’t call myself an atheist, an agnostic, or a theist – none of those terms seem to describe my theology. Atheist and theist being two sides of the same coin – however, the coin keeps slipping out of my hand.

I don’t believe in the same God most atheists don’t believe in, and I do believe in the God that many liberal theologians believe in. But mostly, I find it’s the word God which can get in my way when I talk to others, not the actual experience of God.
Experience is key. Religion, for me, is a felt experience – it’s the experience of feeling connected to something. It’s the experience of addressing the world with the primary word, I-Thou, a la Martin Buber. That experience is what I could name the presence of God, or not, depending on my conversational partner.

Buber, much like Thich Nhat Hanh, says the world is two-fold. Martin Buber was a Jewish philosopher and anthropologist, among other things. Thich Nhat Hanh is a Buddhist monk and peace activist among other things.

Thich Nhat Hanh talks about there being no paper without non-paper elements. Paper, and the non-paper elements (the sunshine, the logger, the cloud, etc.) inter-are. And Buber, says that to humanity, the world is two-fold according to our own twofold attitude. He describes two-fold attitude on the first few pages of his classic, I and Thou. Primary words, he calls them – one primary word is the combination I-Thou and another primary word is the combination I-it. The I-Thou primary word addresses the unbounded relation, whereas the I-it primary word objectifies both the object and the subject...

Which primary word combination you use, has as much to say about the I as its partner in that moment. Which describes, also, the connection of loving yourself and loving your neighbor.

As with God godself, it is much easier to experience than explain. So, I’ve brought a friend with me this morning to help.

This friend happens to be my favorite animal in the whole world. I don’t know why – perhaps you have one – an animal that when you see it in the wild just thrills you no end.

My friend is a moose. I have been fortunate over the years to have spotted many a moose in the wild, and somehow the moose has become a kind of animal guide for me. I appreciate their grand nature and odd look – and love the definition of a moose as a horse put together by a committee.

Because all of us are, in a way, put together by a committee. Our personality is at least partly formed by those who cared for us and raised us. Think of your family of origin as the committee that put you together. Our identity is formed by those whom we loved and tried to emulate.

We mostly go around seeing one another’s personalities, appearance, identities, roles, and less often manage to grasp the entirety of another. When you seek to love yourself and to love your neighbors as yourself – we must accept ourselves as we are, before we have a chance of becoming even better.

What does a moose have to do with loving? I decided that there are four ways. And since a moose is easier to talk about than the two-fold world or interbeing, I decided to start here even though what I’m really talking about in this embodied theology of relation which guides me and may be helpful as you grapple with what it is that grounds you.

1. A moose is strange looking and unique
2. A moose is beautiful and grand
3. A moose is big and terrifying
4. A moose is powerful

A moose is strange looking and unique. Both you and your neighbor were put together by a committee, making you and your neighbor somewhat strange and certainly unique. And though your family of origin may
have intended to raise a horse, you turned out to be a moose. And though we have one idea about how our children are to be, they always surprise us and become something else. Nobody else in the entire world was put together in just the way you were, or your neighbor was. You may think that a moose looks just the same to another moose, but that’s only because you haven’t looked deeply enough. Moose are as individual as people or flowers or snowflakes – no two are exactly alike. No relationship between two people is exactly like any other relationship between two people.

A moose is beautiful and grand. Loving is beautiful. There is nothing more beautiful that that feeling of love – and especially when we learn to love something that was entirely strange to us before; when we learn to love someone we previously feared. Grand is a term that implies magnificent but in an all-encompassing way - everything and all - as in grand total. The grandness of this love cannot be overstated. It can be so large as to move mountains...or dictators.

So, a moose is also big and terrifying. The largeness of that love can put us at extreme risk, like the tourists who are drawn by its beauty to take photos of the moose getting dangerously close to what is, in fact, a wild animal. To love is to know and accept in this complete way – and as I mentioned, “the most terrifying thing,” according to Carl Jung, “is to accept oneself completely.” Even more terrifying, therefore would be to accept your neighbor as yourself. I believe it is through love that we hold ourselves and our neighbor accountable for their actions....

Finally, a moose is powerful. Loving yourself and your neighbor is the most powerful act there is.

The non-violent change movements that have worked best thus far in human history, were non-violent because the protestors were operating out of love, not hate. There have been many revolutions in human history, many wars, many points at which the power based shifted from one side to another – but the revolutions that have changed us were those with love at its center – in this country, labor movements and the civil rights movement stand out, Black Lives Matter and #MeToo.

So back to the powerful moose. Loving your neighbor is never easy, but it is powerful. It is big and terrifying, and yet beautiful and grand, and finally it is mostly strange to us, and always unique.

It is strange to us because we are hard wired like the moose, to herd. We herd with our neighbors and friends, with our fellow congregants, with our tribe, with those who are most like us. And it takes a great deal of ego strength – love of self – to step out of that instinctual response to truly love our neighbor. This is why all the great religious leaders have to teach us to do so – it is not automatic, it is not a given, it is not easy.

My embodied theology of relation – the system of thinking about the world I’ve developed over the last 54 years – helps ground me when I lose sight of what’s important, when I lose balance and fall off life’s treacherous ladder. “Life passed through the fire of thought,” as Ralph Waldo Emerson put it.

My theology has been informed by the lives of Martin Buber and Thich Nhat Hanh, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Henry David Thoreau, Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi, Tarana Burke most importantly, my own life, and your lives too. Though big and terrifying, powerful, beautiful and grand, strange and unique, I try to love myself and my neighbor as myself. There are brief moments when I am able to address the world with the twofold primary word I-Thou, and see all the non-paper elements in the paper. It is not easy. Fortunately, I am not alone. We have each other and Love to guide us.
Benediction

Love like a moose. Love large, love powerfully, make it beautiful and strange and unique. Let love scare you silly for the most terrifying thing is to accept oneself completely. Then, go forth and love your neighbor as yourself.

*Sermons are meant to be spoken and not written. I have not edited this sermon to written form.