Broken and Beautiful ©
preached* for the Unitarian Universalist Church of Vancouver (WA)
by the Rev. Kathryn A. Bert
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How could anyone ever tell you you were anything less than beautiful, how could anyone ever tell you you were less than whole?

I know from years of being a Unitarian Universalist, that many of you found this faith because you had been told that you were less than whole in the faith you grew up with, or by society— that somehow you weren’t accepted for who you were — gay or divorced, questioning, atheist or non-Christian. And you may be here because you that didn’t make sense to you, or more probably because you were hurt by the consequences of those beliefs and you came seeking healing. You found your way here because we told you that you were beautiful the way you are: That here we affirm that black lives matter, that that every person’s gender identity and sexual orientation is perfect the way it is; and that people of all abilities, nationalities, and religious affiliations are inherently worthy.

But then, how did the world get so messed up if we are all so beautiful and inherently worthy? Isn’t there a contradiction? That’s why I love theology — it grapples with the contradictions, the paradox, the mystery. This morning I want explore all the different stories we’ve told so far this morning – the cracked water pot, the shattered light of God and the broken tea cup. All these images provide us way to understand our imperfections without shaming and blaming. There is enough shaming and blaming to go around; healing from those messages is what we need to do, but that is not enough. Our personal healing needs to equip us to heal others and the world.

Fragility is the quality of being easily broken or damaged, the quality of being delicate or vulnerable. And things do seem more fragile these days. There is no denying the fragility of things. From global climate change to increased racial violence in this country to the fragility of democracy itself, ours is a world that is increasingly susceptible to irrevocable damage.

I have studied history enough to know that every generation thought that it was on the brink of disaster faced by no generation before — and yet that doesn’t prevent me from feeling it is true in this moment and wondering what there is to do. The good news is that other generations also knew this and still we are here and so we can learn from our ancestors how it is they kept going, adapting to new and different circumstances with some measure of hope.

We can learn from their stories. I offered 3 this morning because I think we need more than one story to help us understand this contradiction — this need to affirm our beauty and at the same time recognize the fragility of things, this brokenness.

I mean, how messed up did the world get that to say “black lives matter” that people’s lives just “matter” — not “black is beautiful” of a generation before, but that black lives simply matter, sounds like a radical statement? How is it that some people feel so unrecognized and undervalued that when they hear the phrase “black lives matter” they assume an implication that other people somehow don’t matter. That somehow valuing one kind of people undercuts the value of another. How broken is that?

The first story is the one about the cracked pot — the punch line being we’re all cracked pots, eccentric or strange, on our own ways. We all have the ways in which we aren’t perfect or the way we’d like to be or the
way society would tell us we somehow should be and yet, often those imperfections, those uniquenesses can, if properly employed can add beauty to the world, can be an advantage, a benefit.

Our radical individualism continues to get us into trouble. This is an “ism” just like racism, ableism, sexism, commercialism. Not individuality, which is a good thing, but individualism in which we falsely believe that an individual exists in a form that begins and ends with the self. Individualism is when we deny the fact that human beings are social beings - that we are the influence of those other individuals who raised us and shaped us and hurt us and made us feel beautiful and continue to influence us still. That a cracked pot can grow flowers when connected to a pot that holds water and both utility and beauty can be accomplished when they work together. We were meant to work together. We were never meant to function as isolated beings.

Ableism, another one of those insidious “isms,” is born of this illusion of individualism; that the individual begins and ends with the self. That we are “self-sufficient” and do not need to rely on others. In the individualistic world view, the need to rely on another is seen as a weakness, rather than a reality. The implication of that world view, then, is that those individuals who visibly rely on others - other people or assisted devices like wheelchairs or hearing aids - are somehow weaker or lesser or broken and are told that they are less than beautiful, less than whole .... When, really, we are all cracked pots - We were meant to work together. We were never meant to function as isolated beings.

Ableism refers to the set of practices and beliefs that assign inferior value or worth to people who have developmental, emotional, physical, or psychiatric disabilities. The kids on the bus that Karl drives. How could anyone ever tell you you were anything less than beautiful?

That song was written in 5 minutes by Libby Roderick, after talking on the phone to a friend who was going through a difficult time. The song asks how human cruelty can exist when we are inextricably connected to one another. The song “has been sung at a China women’s conference, by monks and AIDS orphans in Zambia, and in Spanish by Texas nuns. The lyrics have been reprinted in a Japanese book for people recovering from eating disorders. It has been translated into Yupik Eskimo at a sexual assault prevention workshop in Alaska and used in a U.S. presidential campaign” – (2004 Dennis Kucinich, if you’re curious as I was)

That song took off because we recognize the ways in which we hurt each other with our words, and seek healing from the cruel messages we’ve received from others, from the society in which we live and learn. The song resonated with so many for the same reasons I like to say that:

That here we affirm that black lives matter, that that every person’s gender identity and sexual orientation is perfect the way it is; and that people of all abilities, nationalities, and religious affiliations are inherently worthy.

We don’t hear those messages in the wider world, and so we come to church to affirm these messages of wholeness.

And that’s what happened with the song of the month for February, that you sang last week and the week before. It’s another song like How Could Anyone, that just sort of took off in popularity – because of its healing message. Formerly known as “standing on the side of love” – it was written by Jason Shelton as an anthem for Marriage Equality, and the phrase was picked up by the UUA as they launched a public advocacy campaign in 2009 to help UU congregations mobilize support in their communities for marginalized groups. The campaign was started in response to the 2008 shooting at the Tennessee Valley UU Church in Knoxville,
Tennessee. In a letter later found by police, the shooter said that he targeted the church because of its liberal values, including its openness to gays and lesbians. “The UU church is the Fountainhead, the veritable wellspring of anti-American organizations like Moveon.org, Code Pink, and other un-American groups,” he wrote. and so, our response was to celebrate that identity and our support of marriage equality and our advocacy for all people who are marginalized because of identity. – be it race, ability, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, nationality, religion. The Standing on the Side of Love campaign has been one of our strongest and most visible UU movements in the last decade.

Jason Shelton, the composer, however, decided to change the line of the song to “Answering the Call of Love.” In addition to the problem of the word “standing” for people who move in the world seated, was the implication of the word, “side” – if we’re on the side of love – does that mean those with different views must stand on the side of hate or of fear? And so we sang it all last month with the new language. Shelton had received feedback from people with physical disabilities over the years that the words of the song made them feel unseen, that the words that left them out hurt.

I once heard an interview by Krista Tippet with Padraig O Tuama/Pádrick o tooma/ in which he tells a story about an encounter in which a self-described Christian fundamentalist asked a person who was gay, “How many times have my words bruised you?” That question stood out for me and is essentially the question that Shelton learned to open himself up to....

Not at first, but ultimately, he learned to hear people with disabilities and more importantly, change his language. He understands his work as piecing back what has been broken – healing the world, Tikkun Olam. Words are a part of that. They may be just words – but they are what we have to communicate, and they are fragile.

The Kabbalist tale of God’s light shattering the vessel that held it, is a story whose moral is also that we must work together. No single shard of light holds the entirety of God – we all have glimpses, or pieces of that divine truth, but the whole is greater than any of us individually can grasp. Shelton, who is temporarily able-bodied, needed people with physical disabilities to reflect back to him his language so he could hear how it hurt them. The story of God’s light is another story that illustrates a humanity that is connected, not isolated, and we were meant to work together. We were never meant to function as isolated beings.

This story has a particular relevance in this time in which people who are marginalized for all sorts of identities – some of which are evident and others which can be hidden – understand that we must work together. The rise of violence against people of various identities requires a coming together, a piecing together of the broken vessel. Like the Muslim American community who raised funds to repair the Jewish cemeteries which were vandalized a few years ago in St. Louis and Philadelphia. They recognize that we are all connected, and those of minority faiths in this country must support one another in this time of increased hate speech and violence.

The third story, that comes from Thai Buddhist Monk Ajahn Chah, a man of great wisdom who was instrumental in establishing Theravada Buddhism in the West, teaches us to understand the truth of uncertainty and to let go control. When we let go of our human desire to control that which we cannot, we can relax into the freedom of the process. “To me this cup is already broken.” When we commit ourselves to any cause, we will have failures as well as success – and when we can relax into the process, rather than
obsess with the outcome, we become free, he teaches. “We can plan, care for, tend and respond. But we cannot control."

Perhaps the brokenness of the world has never been more evident in my lifetime than it is right now. But, as Ajuhn Chah would teach, it was always broken. There was always pain. There was always violence.

That fact is why so many of us find so disturbing the slogan “Make America Great Again”—the phrase itself implies such violence in its willful ignorance of how many people were murdered, captured, enslaved, tortured, marginalized and ignored in the history of this country. To suggest that the golden era was before... marriage equality or perhaps during segregation, the old Jim Crow laws, or slavery itself, colonization, the extermination of people—which America should we return to to become great? And who, then, counts as Americans? It was always broken.

And so, perhaps, by committing ourselves to the process itself—to the process of humanizing, and healing, to answering the call of love, in that process we become free. Free to focus on how we do things, not just what gets accomplished. How we treat each other, not using each other as a means to an end. But this moment. By knowing that the cup is broken, we can give our best to the process, create what we can, and trust the larger process of life itself.

The world is a fragile place. Perhaps fragility is not something to be avoided or prevented or feared. Perhaps it is the quality that makes us recognize that we need one another and bear witness to one another and help one another. May it be so.

Benediction

Our imperfections, our uniquenesses add beauty and benefit to the world. No single shard of light holds the entirety of God—we all have glimpses, pieces of that divine truth, and the whole is greater than any of us individually can grasp. When we commit ourselves to any cause, we will have failures as well as success—and when we can relax into the process we become free.

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