

“Just Love”
February 13th, 2022
Rev. Laurel Gray

The song that Kala just sang so beautifully is attributed to the South African Anti-Apartheid movement. It was a song crowds would sing as protesters were taken to jail so that they could learn each other's names, and know the names of those who were already in the prison cells. It was a way of knowing and being known, and that itself was an act of protest, especially in a world that says some people aren't worth knowing.

Florida's "Don't Say Gay" bill is the latest effort to criminalize LGBTQ identities, making it a crime to speak of gender diversity and queer sexuality. It's unclear if the bill will pass - I pray it doesn't - but it is a chilling reminder of the struggle for queer rights.

Many UU congregations are "welcoming congregations" which is a certification process that means the congregation has done work to be actively accepting and supporting of LGBTQ people. *And* when so much anti-queer rhetoric is steeped in religious language and biblical subtext, I find myself wanting to fight fire with fire.

Yes, our first principle calls us to affirm the inherent worth and dignity of all people, but I want to fight this so-called religious hatred on its own terms. UUs can be nervous about religious language and biblical reference, and I think it's important to own our religiosity, to have the words to argue not only for tolerance of queer people, but active loving affirmation in the name of our religion. We, too can invoke biblical reference.

All of this leaves me wondering how we might conceive of a just sexual ethic, a positive sexual ethic. One that includes people of all genders and sexualities and types of bodies. A positive sexual ethic that doesn't inadvertently frame LGBTQ people as the acceptable other. And, it is Valentine's Day tomorrow, after all.

In his book “Making Love Just” Marvin Ellison, who is a professor of Christian Ethics, writes that creating sexual justice means three things:

“First, honoring the goodness of human bodies and recognizing sexuality as a spiritual power for expressing care and respect through touch.

Second, it requires recognition of and respect for sexual difference, including diversity of body shape and size, sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, and family patterns.

Third, in the face of sexual violence, sexual justice calls for respect and compassionate care between persons and groups.”

Again, he says sexual justice requires three things:

- Honoring the goodness of bodies and seeing sexuality as a spiritual way of expressing care
- Recognizing diversity of body, sexual orientation, gender, and family
- Respect and compassionate care between people and groups

Ellison also writes this, quote, “A fearful people are also likely to project their fear and discomfort about sex and sexuality onto others. In our time the overlapping communities of LGBTQ people, people of color, and people living with disabilities have become the cultural repositories or moral dumping ground for other people’s dis-ease about sensuality and the body” end quote.

Let’s begin with the body.

In 1596 a man named Rene Descartes was born in France. I’m sure many of you know about him – he was a philosopher, scientist and mathematician. But he is perhaps most famous for saying “I think, therefore I am.”

Descartes created a philosophical idea called Cartesian Dualism or mind-body dualism. Now I will confess that I am not a philosopher, but Cartesian dualism essentially says that the mind and the body are separate entities that interact.

In this line of thought, the mind or soul has no physical substance, it’s permanent,

and it can exist outside of the body. The body, on the other hand, is tangible, it's impermanent and it cannot think.

And if Descartes's famous line is any indication – I think, therefore I am – this philosophy infers that we are our minds, but not our bodies. If anything, the body is almost unnecessary.

And I can see how this line of thinking would be seductive. Bodies are as fragile as they are resilient. They age and they ache, they're vulnerable to disease – bodies are impermanent.

Many religions speak of afterlives and reincarnation, all of which fit with this idea that the soul is separate and lasting.

But Descartes loses me with the idea that the mind is the soul – that thinking is our essence, that thoughts matter most.

And even more so, I question the idea that we can separate our souls and our bodies without consequence.

When I spent a summer as a hospital chaplain, the most common and striking question I was asked was how the soul leaves the body. And there was always a reason for asking. It was a question that came from a family member when a patient was in critical condition.

Because what they were asking about was death, about how we transition out of life.

And I've heard just as many stories of people seeing or sensing the soul of their loved one swirling away in the wind after they die.

Death comes when the soul, the life force, the breath and the body separate completely. The body still exists for a while, but it becomes lifeless.

Being alive is the opposite. Life is the unity of the body and breath, of flesh and soul.

To be alive is to be embodied. To be alive is to be a thing of flesh and nerve and need and energy, to know pleasure and pain and love and touch.

You only have to let the soft animal of your body love what it loves.

Sexual justice begins with the body, with, as Marvin Ellison writes, “honoring the goodness of human bodies and recognizing sexuality as a spiritual power for expressing care and respect through touch.”

The Lutheran Pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber wrote a book a few years ago called “Shameless: A Sexual Reformation” in which she does just this. She says in the introduction that it’s time to take all of our antiquated and harmful ideas about sex and bodies and gender and burn them down and start over. And she does.

One of the things I appreciate most about her book is that she’s speaking about sexuality as a whole - the ways that religion and society teach everyone harmful things about sex and bodies and gender – so she doesn’t treat gay and trans and queer people as a separate problem to be solved. The problem is the system, not particular types of bodies or love.

And in a world in which hatred towards LGBTQ people is cloaked in religious language, there is power and I think healing in using religious language to build a positive and inclusive sexual ethic.

You do not have to walk on your knees for a hundred miles through the desert repenting. You only have to let the soft animal of your body love what it loves.

So let’s begin at the beginning.

The Jewish and Christian scriptures both begin with the book of Genesis. It’s the

origin story for creation and tells two different versions of how humans and the universe were created. This translation is adapted from Nadia Bolz-Weber's retelling of Genesis 1 and 2 in her book.

Genesis 1

"In the beginning, God was maybe bored and a little lonely, so God created a terrifyingly vast universe, which included the earth. The earth, our speck of life, was just a void, and this great nothingness was super dark.

And God could have made the universe in any way that she chose, but she's a gardener by nature, so she grew it from seed, knowing it was going to be a process. And the first seeds came in the form of four words from the mouth of God.

Let there be light.

God's words do what they say. So, from the breath of God, the world came into being. Bang! Oceans, land, heavens, sun, moon, stars, planets.

It all took some time. And rather than God doing everything, God shared the work with creation. Calling the earth to bring forth vegetation and the seas to bring forth sea monsters.

And God saw that it was good.

Then God had an explosion of creativity and made animals. And God blessed them by saying "Be fruitful and multiply."

The very first blessing was sex.

Then God said, "let us create humans in our own image and likeness."

God the community, God the family, God the friend group, God the opposite of isolation said, "Let's do this together. Let's create humanity in our image and likeness."

And God saw that this was good.”

Genesis two:

“On the day God created the heavens and the earth, there weren’t any plants yet because there wasn’t any water yet because there wasn’t anyone to do the gardening yet. God didn’t rush. This has to happen in a certain order to work.

Then God formed an earthling (Adam is a genderless word for ‘from the earth’) God formed an earthling out of dirt and breathed into the earthling’s nose to animate them, and this is how we received a soul and the gift of life.

We are dirt and the breath of God – body and soul entwined.

And then God said, “it is not good for the earthling to be alone” and so God took a rib from the first earthling and created a second earthling. And God gave the two to each other because they belonged that way.

They were made for and from each other. And they fit. And this is why still to this day, many of us need to fit with someone else, emotionally, sexually, and spiritually.”

Here ends the reading.

You only have to let the soft animal of your body love what it loves.

To be alive is to be embodied, to feel the air in our lungs and the beat of our hearts. We are made of dirt, of matter, filled with the breath of the heavens. Rabbis have long taught that life begins at birth, that the soul enters the body when we take our first breath. In fact, conservative Christians originally supported abortion rights because of this biblical belief that life begins with breath.

We are not minds floating untethered from the tactile bodily reality of living. We have hearts of flesh - we can touch and feel and love because we are born into bodies - bodies that come in a rainbow of difference.

And Genesis teaches that everyone is created in the image of the sacred, that the image of God is a unified plurality and it is good. And we are made of each other.

There is no single embodiment of the sacred.

Whoever you are, however you were formed, whatever the shape and size and color and ability and gender and desire of your body, it is sacred and necessary and good, as it is.

Because to be alive is to be embodied.

And in Genesis the first blessing that God gives creation is sex – be fruitful and multiply. It's the ability to create life and love and tenderness, to be more together than we are on our own, to know the transcendence of knowing another and being known in return, to express care and respect through touch. This is sacred.

So to be queer or gay or trans or bisexual or asexual, to love who you love, to be yourself, in a society that says you are somehow wrong, *that* is an act of fidelity to all that is holy inside you.

“You do not have to walk on your knees for a hundred miles through the desert repenting.

You only have to let the soft animal of your body love what it loves.”

Blessed be and amen.

This is a Prayer for the Queer Kids
By Rev. Laurel Gray

When I google “prayer for queer kids” the first hit
is all sin,
asking God to force repentance
for what I call holiness.

And so I yell.

I swear and I rage
and I feel the heat of fury mixed with protection.

Absolutely not.

That thing they despise,

I call it sacred,

this being oneself

in a world that suggests repentance
with a tone of holier than thou
damnation.

No. Not here. Not in this house.

There will be no repenting for the courage to love honestly.

No, this is a prayer for the queer kids.

A ring of fire, protecting
the eden that exists inside
of embodied love.

In this house we speak only
of the holiness in existing honestly,
in loving fully.

My prayer for queer kids is this:
may you find the people who love you fiercely,

may the god of grace fill your lungs with life
when people leave you gasping through tears,
may you know in your bones
that you can never be separated from all that is sacred,
because it exists inside of you,
it exists in every gesture of love you dare to offer the world,
a salve to the soul-bruise of anyone
who believes they are only somewhat worthy,
an act of holy defiance.

You, my dear, are glorious
just as you are, now and forever.