

Sermon: The Saving Grace of Community (Laurel)

I wonder if you have had moments like this, moments when you felt the power of a community acting with unexpected love.

A few years ago I attended a meditation event at the Boston Public Library with a group that was traveling around the US holding these large scale meditation events. It was sponsored by a kombucha company and we all got fancy meditation cushions from a new mattress company - also a sponsor - and the leaders had a distinctly LA vibe. It was definitely leaning into the charismatic cool thing, with guest musicians and a very blonde young woman with singing bowls. It was admittedly amazing and I was also very aware of the fact that it was an *event.*

As I was leaving, I heard the two young women next to me talking about how amazing it was to be in this meditative space with so many other people, to have taken time out of their week to feel more centered and listen to music all in the company of other people.

And one of them said “I wish we could do this every week.” It took a lot for me not to turn to them and ask them if they’ve tried going to church - professional hazards of being a minister.

But we’re now a generation or two away from the days when private schools had mandatory church attendance and weekly attendance at some kind of religious community was the norm. The gap has created a dynamic in which people still have spiritual needs, but the practices of tending to those spiritual needs, or even the impulse to take those spiritual needs seriously, have faded.

There can be so much anxiety about the decline of church attendance, but it’s not new, and I find that deeply comforting.

A few weeks ago, I was reorganizing the books in my office and came across the Berry Street Address from 1929 entitled “Are We Outgrowing the Need for a Church?” by Anna Garlic Spencer. She wrote this, which struck me:

“Of one thing we may be sure, whatever else is doubtful, if the Church fills some

need of the average human nature to which no other instrumentality does or can so well minister, then its permanence is secured by the divine law of utility.”

We are doing something here together that is necessary.

Because even as the world and society changes, humans remain deeply social creatures who need the connection of community. On February 11th the Rev. Erica Baron is going to be our guest service leader, followed by a special coffee hour with the board, and the focus of the service and coffee hour will be the question of how we adapt and change to meet the moment. So come back for that - February 11th.

But our theme this month is liberating love and our society puts so much focus on romantic love and familial love that the love of community gets lost. And yet those weak ties and intergenerational friendships and difference that we encounter within community is deeply nourishing and stabilizing.

It's why we do things like child dedications - we know that it takes a village to raise a child, but sometimes forget that it takes a village to feel steady and connected at all ages.

We've been talking this month about what it means to live into an ethic of love, the ways that a love ethic calls us towards justice, protects us from moral injury by refusing to participate in dehumanization - last Sunday's sermon is up on the podcast if you missed it - we've talked about how a love ethic informs our own actions.

But today is about the saving grace of community, because what happens when we're part of a collection of people all engaging in that love ethic together?

When we all practice it together, all of us living from a shared core promise to love, helping each other reflect on our actions and how to align more fully with our core values, then our experience of ourselves is clarity and groundedness.

But, remember, this is not solitary spiritual seeking, we're doing this love ethic

together. That means that our experience of the community should be one of grace, that sense of love surrounding us even when we don't feel like we deserve it, the community becomes a place of spiritual nourishment.

Grace is defined as "courteous goodwill" by the Oxford dictionary and in more theistic terms, it's considered a kind of undeserved divine love. And remember our definitions of love from a few weeks ago - love is not some fluffy thing, it's a deep commitment to what is right and kind and life-giving, which requires honesty.

It's rare in life that we get to be in the midst of a community that's defining feature is grace, goodwill regardless of who we are or what we've done. But grace is also not fake nice, it doesn't lie and say "I'm totally okay with your harmful behavior, carry on." Grace is what we talked about last week, it's refusing to turn someone else's harm back on themselves, while also refusing to let them continue doing that harm.

If you take an ethic of love at the heart of a people, what else could be the experiential outcome? If the thing in me is a promise to live from an ethic of love and everyone else in this community is doing that, too, then our experience of the community as a body is one of grace, like being inside that library filled with people doing a meta meditation in which they are all wishing someone well, sending those blessings out - it's rare that we can settle into that kind of collective care.

It's also why it hurts so much more when religious communities do harm - the fall from grace to violence is so much more forceful.

That experience of grace is then also a good litmus test for whether or not we're really living out our ethic of love. If we're not experiencing grace in our community, then maybe we need to work on practicing our central ethic of love.

The experience of community is one that calls us to live into our highest ideals and also loves us at our most human. Like a choir holding a note impossibly long because we carry the tune while our neighbor breathes and then they let us breathe in turn, this is why we do the work of spiritual life together. Grace is a thing we

make together.

So I invite you to go looking for those moments, both when we're on the receiving end, and when a moment of possibility arises like those men in our story, when we can act with courteous goodwill to each other.

May it be so. Amen.