

WHAT WONDROUS LOVE IS THIS?

-- A sermon by Rev. Lynn Thomas Strauss

There are days when I walk along the streets of my life and on one side, perhaps on my right, I am profoundly aware of life.

There is an energy, a buzz, an excitement that draws me forward into my day. I want to touch everything, I want to draw, to paint, to write poetry, to talk to all strangers. I am filled with awe and wonder.

On the other side, perhaps it is my left...I feel moving along beside me grief and illness and anxiety and fear. Death and sorrow accompany me all the days of my life.

Sometimes I think my path is thus because I am a minister...I feel so intimately connected to the life and death of this congregation- to all those I love, to all those we have lost...

I walk knowing that, at any moment, either life or death can overtake my attention, command my spirit, knock me to my knees, or make me leap for joy.

I don't think it's just because I am a minister; I think it's because I am human.

I love the sidewalk of my life, both the right and the left...being alive and knowing what I know of life, what I know of birth, what I know of death and dying. What a privilege, what a blessing is this sometimes scary path.

And how lonely it can feel. I have no map. Google doesn't yet map the soul.

There are days I walk the streets of my life looking for signs to guide me safely on my way. *Detour, mud and confusion ahead! Stop, don't go any further! Or better, This way to Joy! Help is just around the corner! Dance Party ahead!*

One can sometimes feel disappointed in our liberal faith; there are so few clear road signs...most of the time we have to find our own way. Trial and error can be so time consuming...so frustrating. How many times must we go around the block, continuing in circles of questioning and doubt?

There's a theological enterprise happening among UU clergy; it's called the "Whose Are We?" project. It's sponsored by the Unitarian Universalist Ministers Association. I am one of the trainers in this project...and have led a workshop for my colleagues. I'm supposed to lead one here for all of you. Perhaps I will.

But honestly, what does this question mean...Whose are we? It sounds a bit like a ploy to get me to consider theism. It sounds like a hypothesis for a personal God. That's not the intention however, it is meant as a provocative way to consider the question of dependence and human nature. Who or what do we lean on? What is there, at the heart of things? What is the first cause, the essence...what can I depend on, when all else fails, when I am captured by the deep sorrow and helplessness of one side of my everyday street...is there help for me? Or am I truly alone?

This is the great question, of course, "are we alone?". Is there anything trustworthy beyond this life, beyond this reality in which we walk?

Generally our liberal faith answers "no," if we are thinking of any supernatural guide or god or support. And I am comfortable with that.

Though I am also comfortable hearing from those who do hold to a supernatural sustaining power. Our faith embraces and makes a space for the whole spectrum of theological thought and belief.

But, I must take the question deeper. On what can we rely?

Consider the image of the poem by Edwin Markham, "Anchored to the Infinite." Let me read it again:

The builder who first
Bridged Niagra's gorge,
Before he swung his
Cable, shore to shore,
Sent out across the gulf
His venturing kite
Bearing a slender
Cord for unseen hands
To grasp upon the further
Cliff and draw
A greater cord, and
Then a greater yet;
Till at the last across
The chasm swung
The cable then the mighty bridge
In air!

So we may send
Our little timid thought
Across the void
To God's reaching hands-
Send out our love
And faith to thread the deep-
Thought after thought
Until the little cord
Has greatened to a chain
No chance can break,
And we are
Anchored to the infinite!

Oh, so perhaps the question is, "are we, or how are we, anchored to the infinite?".

The infinite can mean the eternal, anything beyond our own lives, beyond our own lifetimes.

Is Ray Watts not anchored to the infinite? Will not all of our founders, all of us be anchored to the infinite? As long as this congregation is sustained...we will live on...as long as loved ones remember us, or those whose lives we touched still live, or the art we created or the thoughts we sent across the chasm...

As the poet says, we send out our love and faith ...again and again like a cord, a thread across a chasm...until the little cord, the little faith, the little love, the small work of our hands, our mind, our heart...greatens to a chain...which no chance can break...

And we are anchored...to the universe, to the cloud of witnesses...to that which we cannot name.

As I walk the chasm of my street of joy and sorrow, life and death, how can I build a bridge from shore to shore...from curb to curb?

This is where epiphany happens- an epiphany is an unveiling of reality, an interruption in the everyday flow of time-when we intuitively grasp a deeper, more essential reality or truth hidden in things or persons.

There are no signs to safety...there are only great insights, amazing moments of awe and wonder...moments when we see what is hidden deep inside what we call reality. There is, my friends, only love- human love and divine love. Wondrous love.

All faiths agree on this.
Love conquers all.

I re-read the Biblical story of Ruth and Naomi. You remember... There was famine in Judea and Naomi and her husband and two sons went to the country of Moab and remained there.

In time, Naomi's husband died, and their sons grew and took Moabite wives...but the sons also died...and Naomi needed to return to Judea to the family of her ancestors. She urged both her daughters-in-law to remain in Moab where they could find new husbands among their husbands' families.

But one daughter-in-law, Ruth, refused to leave Naomi and insisted on traveling back with her to Bethlehem.

Ruth clung to Naomi saying; "entreat me not to leave you or to return from following you; for where you go I will go, and where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people and your God, my God."

Ruth's epiphany was to know the love she felt for Naomi. And to act on that love.

In the book of Ruth, there is no mention of God. The lifeline, thrown across the chasm of grief and dependence that was Naomi's circumstance was not a message from or an act of God, it was human love on which she leaned...a love I would also call divine.

Through Ruth's loving act, Naomi was anchored to the infinite, for Ruth eventually married Boaz and gave birth to Jesse who became the father of David...who became a King of Israel. You never know.

And so, on Thursday, I walked to the Rockville Town Center, walking in the chasm between sorrow and joy, and feeling alone and separated from love.

And yet, I was neither separated or bereft.

For I sighted love...an epiphany of love threw a cord, a thread across my divided street.

I walked past the building where our former intern minister, Seanan Holland, used to live. Seanan, as you know, was a marine and is now Reverend Holland and serving as a Navy Chaplain.

Anyway, I was walking by when a very good looking young man emerged from the front door...holding the leash of a rambunctious puppy. Looking down at the dog, I saw that this young man had two prosthetic legs, he was wearing shorts, and I saw the shiny metal ankles and feet encased in ordinary running shoes. He was, no doubt, a veteran. There are many wounded vets in our community getting treatment and therapy at the Naval Medical Center.

I felt immediate love for this boy. I wanted to stop and ask him if he needed anything. I wanted to stop and hug him. I wanted to stop and talk to him about war and religion. It didn't feel good to just walk on by. I hoped he had a strong support network. I thought about his mother.

"When I was sinking down, sinking down, when I was sinking down, friends to me gathered round...oh, my soul."

I didn't "do" anything. But I felt the interruption in the everyday flow of time. I participated in a momentary unveiling of reality. A reality that boy lived within every day.

It was humbling.

With my heart still torn open, I went to the movie theater and saw a movie that moved me to tears. I knew tears were what I needed that day.

It was for me another thread creating the bridge between the two sides of the street of my life.

It was the movie *50/50*. It's the story of a young man, age 27, who has a very serious form of cancer. The odds of beating it are 50/50. The film is about how all those around Adam deal with his illness. His best friend, his sorta girlfriend, his mother, his therapist, his doctor.

Adam goes through diagnosis, chemotherapy, losing his hair and feeling really, really sick. He goes through all this, feeling very alone, very isolated. Just before his admission for serious surgery to remove a tumor, he discovers that all of his loved ones have really been supporting him in meaningful ways.

His mother has been going to a support group for parents whose children have cancer. His closest friend has been reading books about how to support a friend with a serious illness. His loved ones had been doing all they could to build a bridge to him, he just didn't know it.

The message of this movie is that friends will gather round, that human love is powerful and protective and accessible...and without limit.

We are throwing out lifelines, love lines...all the time. We send out our timid, loving thoughts across the imagined voids all the time.

And most of us can't believe it.

We find it so hard to believe that we are loved, that the universe will anchor us...that friends will gather round.

These acts of love are buried, hidden in the ground we walk upon. They are threading bridges over our heads as we speak.

It is the nature of the universe to move forward between great tensions, says Brian Swimme and Mary Tucker, and our generativity becomes woven into the vibrant communities that constitute the vast symphony of the universe. We need not be afraid of tensions, of chasms, of grief.

We are not alone.

We can't always see the signs, but we can trust they are there. Love conquers all...it is wide enough, deep enough, prolific enough for all of us.

It is the ministry of this congregation and all varieties of religion-- sacred and secular -- to be loving. That is all we are called to do -- to be a loving congregation...to be a loving person.

Our most important task is to throw a thread of love out into the world for others to grasp.

One final story.

Last weekend, Dave and I were in New York City. We went to an art museum, a branch of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, called PS 1. in Brooklyn.

The renovated old school building had a show focused on 9/11...but all the works of art were created long before 2001. Each room of the school had a different installation.

In one room there was a white brick wall, and embedded in the wall were paintings, creations that looked like engraved headstones. There weren't too many, about a dozen or so...each one touching another one...so they formed one artistic piece, one statement, one whole story.

On each headstone there were names and dates and one sentence descriptions of how that person had died. They were true stories, and many were children or young teenagers.

Each stone named a person who had died saving someone's life. Quite a few were siblings who had died saving a brother or sister from drowning or fire.

Every one had died saving a life.

For New York City, this was a profound exhibit...how many died on 9/11 while saving or attempting to save a life?

Throughout history, how many people have given their lives for others?

The wounded vet living just blocks away in Rockville had certainly done so...his old life is over forever.

Ruth gave her life to Naomi, and consequently to her people.

Lovers and strangers throw out life lines to us every single day.

And we go and do likewise.

On wondrous Love we can depend.

So May It Be/Amen/Blessed Be