

The Realm of the Heart

A Sermon Preached by Pilar Millhollen, July 22nd, 2018

Readings: from *Love & Death* (Forrest Church); from *Beloved* (Toni Morrison)

I had a moment this week where I looked at my desk, I looked at the coffee table, at all the papers and miscellaneous odds and ends strewn all over my couch, and I thought, I don't know what to do. It was shortly after the recent dropped bomb, so to speak, in Helsinki - the meeting between the world's two favorite autocrats, and I just found myself completely overwhelmed. I have new work to do, I have old work I haven't gotten to, and the world is falling apart. That's what I actually thought. I just sat there amidst at all the stuff - physical and mental and spiritual - and I couldn't move. I felt a kind of tired that drained me of any capacity to move forward, even moment to moment, and so I just sat there. And shed a few tears. The next thought I had was of Forrest Church, and then of Toni Morrison. Forrest was the minister for 30 years at one of the Unitarian Universalist Association's flagship churches, All Souls on Manhattan's upper east side, and Toni is a prolific award-winning American author who bears witness to the experience of being black and a woman in America. Why did these two come to mind? They have totally different backgrounds; but they speak and write of the same truths. Morrison writes from the center of a kind of suffering that most people don't want to sit with too long - yet she dives in and holds the space with a feverish holiness. Then there's Church. In addition to ministering to the 1,000+ members of his historic congregation, whose pews had been occupied by prominent Americans from Herman Melville to the founders of what became the American Red Cross, Forrest was a public theologian and author, and he wrote a great deal about two things: love and death. I guess he linked these together specifically because of the long tradition of New England Unitarian emotional detachment from the realities of mortality, and he found himself accompanied by loss throughout his life. I guess by the last year, he was well acquainted with death through his ministry but also because he spent several years facing his own mortality during a long bout with cancer that ended his life at 61 years of age.

I didn't know him personally, and I was only in church once when he preached toward the end. But he had a way of getting right to the heart of the matter in the face of the most devastating obstacles. Maybe it had to do with some questionable choices he made earlier in his life, though I can't say most of us haven't had the same experience. Either way, Forrest didn't shy away from the horrible questions that seize hold of us when awful things happen to us or our loved ones - why is this happening, and what did I (or we) do to deserve this? And he had the spiritual courage to actually answer the questions as best he could with a theology of connection. "What did I do to deserve this?" Nothing, he answers - absolutely nothing. And yet our traditions for years have attempted to answer that question with theology that either leaves us empty or actually makes us culprits in our own despair - "God has a reason for everything" is a phrase that I could bear to never hear uttered again in the face of terminal cancer or a parent losing a child, let alone in response to systemic suffering like our refugee children that have yet to be reunited with their families. So is "your faith just isn't strong enough." I could really do without that one too. But the why of the matter is equally difficult, and in the depth of illness, Forrest concluded, asking why is not a fruitful question; we likely never get an answer. Instead, he suggests, let us ask, "where do we go from here?" His conclusion? "Part of the answer must include the word, 'together.'" I'd never really thought much about the delineation between suffering

and despair, or what can mitigate the latter when the former accompanies us, but now more than ever it's been on my mind. "Despair is a consequence of suffering only when affliction cuts us off from others," Forrest notes. And he's on to something that crosses the boundaries of culture, experience, and nation...Toni Morrison offers us this truth in the Nobel prize-winning book *Beloved*. She gives us the character of Baby Suggs, holy. Baby Suggs has just passed at the beginning of the book, so her story unfolds in flashbacks as her daughter-in-law and granddaughter contend with a life that no one deserves, barely out of slavery in the late 19th century and isolated in a house haunted by a murdered baby and generations of trauma. In her lifetime, Baby Suggs, holy, suffered the unthinkable losses of too many of our ancestors, rape, children taken and sold, chronic physical violence. Baby Suggs became Baby Suggs holy because of her life. And Baby Suggs, holy, was intimately acquainted with love and death. Her sermons demanded her listeners to claim themselves, their embodied, wounded, and suffering selves, for their own. "In this here place, we flesh," she preaches in the clearing of the woods where the community gathered. "Flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard. Yonder they do not love your flesh." Baby Suggs took what she had that was unique to her alone – her heart – in her embodied, living self – to remind her listeners of the power that they had – to love with their own unique hearts. In a world that sought to claim, to conquer, to destroy them, she said no, you cannot be destroyed. Beginning with yourselves, in your own bodies, with each other, connecting to the source of life through laughter that no one else can own, through tears from a sorrow that belongs wholly to each of you, a sorrow you alone can claim, through song that cannot be stopped in the clearing, through using your own bodies to dance as they were made to. Love your hands, your feet, your mouth, your flesh, for they are yours and they are holy, she told them. But most of all, she charged, "more than your life-holding womb and your life-giving private parts, hear me now, love your heart. For this is the prize."

The online publication Medium ran an article the day after the Helsinki summit about self-care. The subtitle included "45 daily acts to stay sane in the chaos and madness," and we need not say more about what the subtitle is referring to. The author of the article, Nick Ward, specializes in helping coaches, healers and creative entrepreneurs to deepen their practices of self-care, and in it he lists the obvious things that we might always think of, like spending more time outside in nature, or with animals, or spending time in meditation every day. But he also sounds uncannily like Baby Suggs, holy. "Sing," he exhorts us; even if you can't carry a tune in a bucket, try singing as loudly as you can. Laugh as often as possible, even if it means turning on an inane sitcom for a few minutes and ignoring the rest of the world. But right alongside it, he urges us to cry as many tears as we can. Especially men, he proclaims, because so many have been socially conditioned not to. "Rather than being a sign of giving up," he says, "it's actually a powerful way to regroup and to heal." I agree. Move, he declares, whether it's dancing or stretching or anything that reconnects the raging and racing thoughts of our troubled minds back to the living breathing houses that they inhabit in our miraculous bodies. But even after the solitary practices, of which you can do any of the above, he urges us to reconnect to others in the practice of healing and restoring our selves. "Keep communication channels open," he gently suggests, whether with friends, acquaintances, or foes. "Spend time with children and young people," and maybe most importantly, create a listening circle – a time for which we can speak candidly from the inmost parts of our hearts and to listen just as intently to

the inmost parts of the hearts of each other. And the last three acts he suggests? Connect to the presence of the infinite; remember that you are not alone; and cultivate feelings of love. That always feels generic, when people say “you’re not alone,” and to be more loving, but he points to what this looks like in practice: “Our greatest weapon against tyranny and the resulting demoralization therefrom is to deny the enemies of freedom the hatred that fuels and sustains their causes. By consciously, relentlessly and wholeheartedly practicing acts of love and kindness we will build a peaceful, more just, and fair world. And until we get there, we’ll sustain our lives and the lives around us with this fire that can never be extinguished.”

This congregation has suffered a great deal of loss this year. Personal illnesses and death have touched many of us, and in a time of social upheaval, we can only deal with so much. Another minister once said to me, “grief is like standing with your back to the ocean: you never know when a wave is going to come and knock you down.” When personal grief strikes us, while anxiety about the state of our country or our world becomes a daily norm, it can begin to feel not only insurmountable, but with no end in sight. It is at this point that we must, not should, but *must* take care of ourselves, our bodily and spiritual selves, and then we must take care of each other in the inevitable link between the two. Baby Suggs, holy, only experiences the kind of despair that Forrest Church identifies when the house becomes haunted by the ghost of the dead baby and eventually drives everyone away from her and her daughter-in-law and granddaughter. She survived the horrors of the antebellum south, she survived giving birth and deciding not to memorize the features of her babies too closely because she knew they would be taken from her, and still she preached. Still she prayed. Still she taught love because she felt love, for herself and for her community that needed her. It was the separation, the alienation, the feeling of being cut off from her community, that drove her from suffering to despair. We cannot survive without each other, *and* we cannot survive without caring for ourselves, either. As Forrest Church notes, “unless we armor our hearts, we cannot protect ourselves from loss. We can only protect ourselves from the death of love.” Sometimes it means saying no when you cannot take on another task. Sometimes it means taking a sick day. And sometimes it means gathering close to others who are suffering, or to friends or family who don’t need you to act happy, or be a certain way, who can sit with the overwhelm with you and let it be what it will be, no pretense, just the realm of the heart: the realm where souls can laugh, sing, cry, wail, scream, run, dance, without fear, without shame, and without reserve.

If you don’t have any practices of intentional self care now, I would invite you to try out a few and see if they speak to you. When you awake in the morning, try taking 5 minutes to come into your body by consciously breathing in slowly and deeply, and breathing out the same way. The act of intentionally filling your lungs with what they need actually tells the body that it’s all right, even when the mind disagrees. When you feel anxiety or overwhelm or perhaps a deep sadness, breathe and plant your feet into the earth that holds you up. Connecting to the ground, especially barefoot, has been discovered to reduce inflammation throughout the body, in joints and throughout the nervous system. But no wonder, as it is the source of our nourishment, from which we came and to which we return. Unplug. I know we all know this, but many of us must be on our devices for our workday as well as recreationally. And though they seem to connect us to the world, they tend instead to isolate us from real human connection. So take a few hours to disconnect from the wires and reconnect to what is at hand.

Finally, we have this space. This sacred space is empty much of the week, so let's give ourselves the communal gift of creating a support circle. We each have much to contend with, and I believe that seeking sanctuary in the form of a weekly gathering time for sharing and listening without judgment and with support is necessary and vital for our lives, as people who care deeply for each other and for those outside these four walls. This week, look for an announcement for first date and time, and I invite suggestions for best times and days if you have interest. Together, we can create our own Clearing – our own place to speak our truth or to sit in silence, to bear witness and to restore our bodies, our minds, and our hearts for the ongoing journey that we have all been miraculously, beautifully, called into by a love so great it cannot be extinguished. Let us hold each other and ourselves up with this love, manifesting the grace that the Spirit of Life has given to us that is ours to claim, to own, that can never be taken from us.