

## **“To Make the World a Blessed Place”**

Sermon delivered on June 3, 2018

Unitarian Church of Montpelier

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### **Reading**

selection from My Grandfather's Blessings: Stories of Strength, Refuge, and Belonging by Rachel Naomi Remen

“We bless the life around us far more than we realize. Many simple, ordinary things that we do can affect those around us in profound ways... Blessings come in forms as simple as the greeting commonly used in India. On meeting even a total stranger, one bows and says NAMASTE: I see the divine spark within you.

A woman once told me that she did not feel the need to reach out to those around her because she prayed every day. Surely, this was enough. But a prayer is about our relationship to God; a blessing is about our relationship to the spark of God in one another. God may not need our attention as badly as the person next to us on the bus or behind us on line in the supermarket. Everyone in the world matters, and so do their blessings. When we bless others, we offer them refuge from an indifferent world.”

### **Sermon**

A couple of Saturdays ago you may or may not have joined the 29 million people in the United States alone who indulged in watching a historic event taking place across the Atlantic Ocean: the royal wedding of Prince Harry and Meghan Markle.

I didn't watch the illustrious event live, but I did pull up a video of the ceremony later and, I have to say, I concur with many others that the whole ceremony was truly a blessing in many different ways. I was especially moved to watch the powerful sermon delivered by Bishop Michael Curry - the first African American presiding bishop of the Episcopal Church in America.

There was also the blessing of the phenomenal gospel choir and talented cellist and the mere fact that these two people, one the descendant of slaves, and the other the descendant of people who established colonies dependent on slave labor, would fall in love and commit themselves to each other in marriage.

But, the sermon was truly the highlight for me. In case you missed it, the bishop's sermon began with this short quote from Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. "We must discover the power of love, the redemptive power of love. And when we do that, we will make of this old world a new world, for love is the only way." The Bishop's message was all about the transforming and redemptive power of love.

I think this message is deceptively simple and one that can feel trite and overused. But, what if we took this message seriously? What a blessing it would be if love really did prevail, if we truly believed that love is the only way.

In his sermon Bishop Curry paints a picture of what this world might look like:

"When love is the way, then no child will go to bed hungry in this world ever again.

When love is the way, we will let justice roll down like a mighty stream and righteousness like an ever-flowing brook.

When love is the way, poverty will become history. When love is the way, the earth will be a sanctuary.

When love is the way, we will lay down our swords and shields, down by the riverside, to study war no more."<sup>1</sup>

Instead, what we too often find is quite the opposite. Instead of the blessing of love, we are often living with the curse of indifference. Elie Wiesel, the writer, teacher, activist, and Holocaust survivor, famously said, "The opposite of love is not hate, it's indifference."

Indifference is what keeps us separate and isolated and traps us in relationships that lack caring.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2018/05/20/612798691/bishop-michael-currys-royal-wedding-sermon-full-text-of-the-power-of-love>

As Rachel Naomi Remen writes, “When we bless others, we offer them refuge from an indifferent world.”

We need protection from the harm that indifference can cause.

Indifference harms each of us and our planet in innumerable ways.

Indifference causes us to buy into a “winners and losers” mentality that says that if someone is poor it’s their own fault.

Indifference makes us resistant to believing the stories of victims of sexual abuse and assault.

Indifference keeps us from looking at how our habits might be harming the natural world rather than protecting it.

And, indifference stops us from being curious about others - their struggles and pain.

I am certainly not immune from this curse of indifference.

Sometimes this feeling of indifference comes on when I’m just feeling overwhelmed.

When it feels like there is just so much to do and so much pain and suffering to empathize with and respond to in addition to whatever personal challenges I might be facing.

The danger is letting this become a way of life.

Elie Wiesel also said that when we become indifferent, we stop living.

Indifference is rooted in a kind of numbness - a numbness to the sacredness of life. Life is instead viewed as disposable and transactional, and if indifference prevails, our own lives become dreary and desolate.

Blessing others is all about tapping into, as Tara Brach puts it, “the sacred loving presence that shines through all of us.”<sup>2</sup>

To make the world a blessed place we must recover and uncover the spark of the divine, the sacredness of each of us and of creation, the loving presence that shines through all of us.

We must demonstrate to one another that the world is not indifferent.

We must assert to everyone that they matter. We must assert this even to ourselves.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.tarabrach.com/meditation-blessings-of-love/>

And, we must insist to ourselves and others that our worth is not because of how much money we make, or how busy we are, or where we go to school, or because of what we can do for others or what others can do for us. We matter because we are each the embodiment of Love and Goodness.

I believe that this is a truth we long to hear. We so long to feel loved, to have our sacredness affirmed by others - to feel the blessing of this acknowledgment. This is a universal yearning, and so, in a way, we are continually looking to be blessed by others - to be reminded of this sacred loving presence.

And, we can choose to bless the life around us in the most ordinary of ways as Rachel Naomi Remen says in our reading.

An unexpected phone call.

A warm smile.

A heartfelt embrace.

Returning a lost earring or glove.

Letting someone go ahead of you in the line at the grocery store who seems to be in a hurry.

Sending a thank you note.

In these small ways, we choose to bless the world. These small gestures communicate compassion and kindness, which at any given moment may be just what someone needs to reassure them of life's goodness, that everything will be okay. We all need this.

As I said last week, we are desperate for the beauty that will endure the brokenness. We need both to receive and to give blessings to bring that beauty to life.

This is what so many of us are trying to do especially in the face of actions that feel, instead, like cursing the world - actions that don't remind us of our sacred loving presence but, instead create devastation through violence and disregard of life.

This past week, I read a news story about the death toll in Puerto Rico after Hurricane Maria. The government has an official number of 64, but a study done by Harvard University over the last several months puts that number over 4,000.<sup>3</sup> Thousands of people who have died as they have been cut off from access to power, water, medical care - waiting for a more robust response from the government. The authors of the

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.cnn.com/2018/05/29/us/puerto-rico-hurricane-maria-death-toll/index.html>

recently released report on these numbers say that, “These numbers...underscore the inattention of the United States [U.S.] government to the frail infrastructure of Puerto Rico.” I think you could just as easily replace inattention with *indifference* in that sentence.

Between these two approaches - blessing the world with our love or cursing it with our indifference - we have a choice. And, I believe that deep down we know this. We can feel ourselves pulled between these choices all the time. This was made evident to me last week.

While we were in Washington, DC, I watched as my son played on his grandmother’s back deck. He has such an amazingly alive and vivid imagination. And, he brought outside two stuffed animals - one owl and a donkey. As he played with them, he seemed to have two different narratives going. In one, the owl had put its talons into the donkey’s flesh wounding it badly. The owl was also trapped - tied up with some string hanging down from the patio umbrella.

In another version of this dramatic play he followed a very different story. He repaired the hole in the donkey’s side and freed the owl from its captivity. Back and forth he went between these two stories - a story of violence, woundedness, and oppression and a story of repair, healing, and liberation. Back and forth he went knowing the fundamental truth that he could make this choice and how easily the narrative could change.

The theologian and minister Rebecca Parker says that we can choose to use our gifts to bless or to curse the world.

She writes:

“Your gifts  
whatever you discover them to be  
can be used to bless or curse the world.  
The mind’s power,  
    The strength of hands,  
        The reaches of the heart,  
the gift of speaking, listening, imagining, seeing, waiting.  
Any of these can serve to feed the hungry,  
    bind up wounds,  
    welcome the stranger,

praise what is sacred,  
do the work of justice  
or offer love.  
And any of these can draw down the prison door  
hoard bread  
abandon the poor,  
obscure what is holy,  
comply with injustice  
or withhold love.

You must answer this question:  
What will you do with your gifts?  
Choose to bless the world.”<sup>4</sup>

Ultimately, making the world a blessed place is about making Love evident and real. It is about living as if Love is the way.

May we choose to share our love, to cast out indifference, to bind up wounds, to commit to the liberation of others so that we may know ourselves and one another as a blessing.

So may it be.

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<sup>4</sup> Rebecca Ann Parker (Robert Hardies, ed.), Blessing the World: What Can Save Us Now, p. 163-165.