

“We Are Each Other’s Harvest”

Sermon by Rev. Joan Javier-Duval

Unitarian Church of Montpelier

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Reading “Paul Robeson” by Gwendolyn Brooks

That time
we all heard it,
cool and clear,
cutting across the hot grit of the day.
The major Voice.
The adult Voice
forgoing Rolling River,
forgoing tearful tale of bale and barge
and other symptoms of an old despond.
Warning, in music-words
devout and large,
that we are each other’s
harvest:
we are each other’s
business:
we are each other’s
magnitude and bond.

Sermon

My brothers and I didn’t always get along well when we were growing up. I am the middle child and the one girl in the family. Sometimes it would be my brothers who teamed up on me, but often it was my older brother and I who, like hungry lions, would smell the weakness of our younger sibling and pounce on him with our biting words and sometimes our wrestle holds. I

don't share this to condone our behavior in any way, but it's an honest portrayal of our sibling relationship at one point in time.

Despite this, I of course, loved and still love my younger brother very much. One day when we were in the sixth and third grades, or thereabouts, we were outside of our elementary school and I noticed that one of my brother's classmates was teasing him. Instinctively, I felt the heat of anger rise in my body and the urge to protect my brother and stand by his side. I don't remember exactly what I said to his classmate but the essential message was "Back off!"

Now, one could say this was a natural and genetically programmed impulse to protect my sibling—my kin—from harm because we are connected by blood, after all.

Over time, my sense of who is kin has grown as has that sense of wanting to stand with others who are being bullied or attacked for who they are or who are being pushed down by the weight of an oppressive economic system or whose rights are being denied and trampled upon. And, in turn, I have wanted others to stand with me.

I know that this expansive notion of kinship—kinship that goes beyond blood and biological family—is motivating for so many of you, too. It is what leads you to reach out a helping hand to neighbors in need, to support the community lunches and the food pantry, to volunteer at the emergency winter shelter, to choose careers teaching, healing, and serving the public good.

There is so much good that can come from recognizing our kinship with others.

And, I will admit that expanding my own sense of kinship has not always been easy. One of the greatest tests of my expansive notion of kinship has come through my activism. In the movements for workers' rights, immigrant justice, reproductive justice, racial justice, gender protections, we are constantly faced with opponents - those people and institutions who have created the injustices we are fighting against or who create obstacles to achieving the justice we seek.

These opponents have seemed to me to be the opposite of kin. In the past, I had moments when I felt almost no sense of connection or belonging with those who I have witnessed disparaging

immigrants, opposing minimum wage increases, or arguing against abortion and reproductive care access.

It was easy to accept this distance and sense of alienation when my opponents were far away - not real people who I had to interact with in any kind of intimate way but names in a news story or profiles on social media.

In more recent years, the opposition has come closer to home in my personal circles of family and friends. Also, living in a small community, an “opponent” on an issue could turn out to be a neighbor or a friend of a friend or another parent in my child’s school. Someone I might consider an opponent could also be someone I actually have to live in community with.

I have also had to reckon with the Universalist strand of our theological roots which emphatically asserts that no one is left out of God’s expansive love and that nothing we could ever say or do would, in the end, keep us from belonging within that circle of love.

Those are some challenging theological claims to hold. It turns out that love is actually quite demanding of us even, and especially, when that love includes the people who we see as the opposition.

In times of high political stakes, like the moment we are in, you may have thought or even feel now something along the lines: “I hate my opponent and I don’t want the best for them.” That’s a natural and honest feeling when one is so locked in opposition, in a feeling of it’s them versus us or them versus me. Hate and enmity are emotions that can and do arise especially if we’re feeling threatened or when we’ve been harmed.

Those exact words, “I hate my opponent and I don’t want the best for them,” were spoken by Donald Trump at the memorial for Charlie Kirk, the slain conservative Christian founder of Turning Point USA, last week.

Regardless of one’s political orientation, it is the norm and increasingly acceptable to hate one’s opponent and to not only not want the best for them, but to even wish them harm.

This is a dangerous feeling. We have witnessed where hate and enmity can lead.

Yet, the hurt and the anger are real. I know that those feelings of hurt and anger are present right here and right now. I have felt them myself especially in recent days.

The question for us is, how can we direct this anger in ways that might lead to a just and peaceful world? How can we use this anger to bring about a world not defined by exclusion but kinship, a world of belonging for all?

In her book *See No Stranger*, Valarie Kaur lays out an approach to centering what she calls revolutionary love. Her approach is based in the tenets of the Sikh religion she was raised in and the ideal of the *sant-sipahi*, the warrior-sage. The warrior who fights, and the sage who loves.

Kaur teaches us how to love ourselves, how to love others, and how to love our opponents. In her vision of revolutionary love, our opponents are not left out. Instead, she suggests a three-part approach to loving our opponents, beginning with giving space for our rage in safe containers so that we can tend our wounds, then listening to understand the wounds of our opponents, and finally gaining the information needed to reimagine solutions.

She states: “The aim of divine rage is not vengeance but to reorder the world.”¹ I find this distinction so helpful in its clarity and groundedness in a moral vision. Divine rage is not hostile or antagonistic. It does not seek retribution. Divine rage seeks a world reordered by love.

A reordering of the world must be based in an inclusive and demanding love. A reordering of the world centered in love cannot include a repetition of harmful supremacist beliefs and practices that exclude some in order to prop up a few. A reordering of the world centered in love cannot be based on the othering, exclusion, or dehumanization of any group.

In a reordered world, the recognition of our kinship is a recognition of our shared humanity. This is a world in which we all belong, friends and foes, the righteous and the meek, the sinner and the saint.

¹ Valarie Kaur, *See No Stranger: A Memoir and Manifesto of Revolutionary Love* (One World, 2020), 133.

At the same time, it is not a world in which we ignore the harm that is done to us or that we do to one another. Kinship also includes accountability. For all of us to belong, we must also be able to name wrongdoing, hold ourselves and one another accountable for that wrongdoing, and stay in touch with our shared humanity.

I was thinking about this recently when I saw a short news clip. Someone who lives in Texas was being interviewed by a journalist. And this man had recently taken in three children. The three children of a friend, a woman from Honduras with a legal work visa who had been deported leaving her children orphaned in the United States. In this interview, the man said he had voted for Donald Trump, and he felt tricked. He would never have believed that his friend would have been taken out of this country and he would be left to be the guardian for her children.

You might imagine some of the comments on this post. Some of the anger, the “I told you so” and “How could you not have known?” It’s fair to feel that way.

And yet, in what kind of world can we belong not just with those children and that mother but with that man, too?

When you ask another person to really see you and to respect you, when you go out into the streets demanding dignity and justice, when you refuse to be silent when you and others are mistreated, you are saying we all belong.

john a. powell describes belonging in this way: “Belonging means having the right to make demands on systems and structures. Belonging is being respected as an equal human being with full dignity. Belonging is not just asking for us to be afforded the dignity and the voice that we all as humans inherently deserve; belonging means we must also accept all others in the same way and afford them their dignity and voice.”²

When we all belong, we can demand that we are treated with full dignity and respect and we must be willing to extend that same dignity to all others.

² john a. powell, *The Power of Bridging: How to Build a World Where We All Belong* (Sounds True, 2024), 97.

I know that this is a tall order, and the examples we have of people who have been able to hold these tensions and complexities are not many. Yet, I believe this is what love calls us to do. Love calls us hold onto a vision of this reordered world, even while we may still be a long way off from getting there.

In this world, the words of Gwendolyn Brooks would ring true: “We are each other’s harvest. We are each other’s business. We are each other’s magnitude and bond.”

Let us continue building this world of love and belonging.
And when it is difficult, when we are weary, may we find strength and courage in one another.

So may it be.