

Did you ever think there might be a fault line passing under your living room: that just beneath you is the unseen seam of great plates that strain through time?

And that your life, already spilling over the brim, could be invaded, sent off in a new direction, turned aside by forces you were warned about but not prepared for?

Shelves could be spilled out, the level floor set at an angle in some seconds' shaking.

You would have to take your losses, do whatever must be done next.

When the great plates slip and the earth shivers and the flaw is seen to lie in what you trusted most, look not to more solidarity, to weighty slabs of concrete poured or strength of cantilevered beam to save the fractured order.

Trust more the tensile strands of love that bend and stretch to hold you in the web of life that's often torn - but always healing.

There's your strength.

The shifting plates, the restive earth, your precious life, they *all* proceed from love, the ground on which we walk together.

- Robert Walsh

This poem was written by my colleague, the Rev. Robbie Walsh, whom I knew in my early days of ministry in Massachusetts. I think it's a poem worthy of a refrigerator magnet, one to which to return over and over again. I cite it this morning because it speaks to two themes I am addressing in today's sermon.

First, it speaks of the "fault line passing under your living room," "the unseen seam of great plates that strain through time." In other words, the poem reminds us that the security of our daily lives should never be taken for granted. Tumult can come upon us unaware, at any time.

Second, it counsels us to love, when tumult comes upon us. This is counterintuitive advice because when faced with tumultuous times, we are more inclined to fall back upon the fight-flight survival response than we are to lean into love. "Trust more the tensile strands of love that bend and stretch to hold you in the web of life that's often torn but always healing," writes Robbie. "There's your strength. The shifting plates, the restive earth, your precious life, they all proceed from love, the ground on which we walk together."

We now find ourselves living in tumultuous times, the result of a global pandemic, a perilous threat to our economic system, racial tensions rising in our streets, and an utter lack of leadership to guide our nation. It seems we are in the midst of a perfect cultural storm. If we were to heed Robbie's advice, we would be putting our trust in love right now. Observing our current cultural dynamic, I see many forces on the move. Love, however, seems conspicuously absent.

This lack of love as a force in our current cultural dynamic is ominous. Thinking on this, I recalled Bell Hooks book, “All about Love,” from which we heard in today’s Reading:

“I awakened from my trance state and was stunned to find the world I was living in, the world of the present, was no longer a world open to love... all around me I heard testimony that lovelessness had become the order of the day. I feel our nation’s turning away from love as intensely as I felt love’s abandonment in my girlhood. Turning away we risk moving into a wilderness of spirit so intense we may never find our way home again. I write of love to bear witness both to the danger in this movement, and to call for a return to love.”

Like Bell Hooks, I, too, fear that in the absence of love “we risk moving into a wilderness of spirit so intense we may never find our way home again.” Hence this sermon, my attempt to help us rethink love, both as the ethic that guides us and as the prescription for our action in the world during these tumultuous times.

Now, you may wonder, when I say something like, “we risk moving into a wilderness of spirit so intense we may never find our way home again,” that perhaps I’m being overly dramatic. With that in mind, let me say just a bit about what I observe in our current cultural dynamic and why it concerns me.

As I wrote in my sermon synopsis for this sermon, liberals are on the move again! Faced with a global pandemic, a perilous threat to our economic system, racial tensions rising in our streets, and an utter lack of leadership to guide our nation, we are pushing back against the power structures that divide and oppress people. We are galvanized and demanding revolution. This is wonderful to see!

That said, I also wrote in my sermon synopsis that there is something disturbingly lacking in this demand for revolution. We are a long way from love. I believe this is because many liberals see themselves as engaging in a moral Civil War. Hence, many are engaged in foxhole ethics, in which love has no place: “All is fair in love and war,” as they say.”

From social media to our college campuses to the halls of Congress, we hear disturbing rhetoric from liberals these days. We hear the rhetoric of moral superiority, conquest, disdain, and vulgarity - even from our elected officials. Any perusal of most any social media website these days will make this abundantly clear to any relatively objective observer. Any relatively objective observer of certain individuals and groups on the left will notice the “take no prisoners” mentality that has emerged. One example would include the emergence of the group, By Any Means Necessary, which takes its name from a phrase in a speech that Malcolm X gave in 1965. Another would include Michigan Congresswoman Rashida Tlaib, who, hours after being sworn into Congress, said, “...we’re gonna go in there and impeach the **m-fer.**” Other examples are easy to find so I won’t belabor the point.

Now, I want to be quick to point out that whether liberals ought to be morally indignant regarding much of what is going on in this country is not the issue to which I speak. (I share much of the moral indignation that drives this behavior.) Rather, I am speaking about the way we liberals go about our business. I am speaking about the disturbing lack of love in our demand for revolution.

In just a bit I’m going to talk about love’s place in this revolution. Before doing that I’m going to talk for a few minutes about the psychology of moral Civil War.

Pogo said it best: “We have met the enemy and he is us.” Now, when Pogo said this he was talking about humanity’s penchant to pollute the environment. Because most people don’t know the context in which Pogo uttered this phrase, they tend to use it as a lesson in moral psychology. That is, it tends to be used to remind people not to become the “evil” they oppose.

When I hear liberal rhetoric of moral superiority, conquest, disdain, and vulgarity, I fear that we liberals are becoming the “enemy” we oppose. While the *moral positions* liberals stake out are very different than those on the right, the *psychology* that undergirds the moral positions liberals stake out seems to me to be increasingly identical to the psychology that undergirds the moral positions of those on the right.

Moreover, it’s important to recognize that the further one moves from love the more one steps onto the slippery slope of deluded action. To explain what I mean by this, let’s do a quick history review.

When most people think of terrorism they tend to think of the Middle East, e.g., ISIS, the PLO and Israel, and 9/11. Few people think of the terrorism that wrought havoc in United States during the 1970s. Almost no one thinks about the fact that much of the terrorism that wrought havoc in the United States during the 1970s came at the hands of left-wing groups.

In the two decades since 9/11, terrorists have committed less than three dozen terrorist attacks in the United States and killed fewer than 100 people. During the 1970s, terrorists committed hundreds of terrorist attacks in the United States and killed 184 people, injuring more than 600 others. This means that during the decade of the 1970s, terrorists committed exponentially more acts of terror in the United States and killed fourfold the number of people than in either of the last two decades.

Terrorism in the United States was so ubiquitous in the 1970s that there was an average of one terrorist attack every three days and one bomb detonated every week. This was particularly personal for me. When I was a young boy in the 1970s my father had become locally famous for diffusing a pipe bomb while on duty as a police officer in Ann Arbor, Michigan. Fame be damned! It took me a long time to stop worrying about whether my father was going to come home from work every night.

But let me return to the point I’m trying to make, namely, that left-wing extremism was responsible for much of the terrorist wave of the 1970s: **The Weather Underground**, an antiwar organization that targeted the Pentagon, the US capital, and banks, were credited for 25 bombings in 1975 alone. (They were suspected of 20 more.) **The Black Panthers** carried out 24 bombings, committing numerous other assaults and hijackings. Other left-wing extremist groups follow these examples: **The Black Liberation Army**, **The Symbionese Liberation Army** (made famous by the Patty Hearst drama), **The New World Liberation Front**, and **The United Freedom Front**.

So, here’s the bottom line... It’s not whether one’s moral positions align on the right or the left that makes moral Civil War dangerous. It’s the psychology of extremism that makes moral Civil War dangerous. It’s a much shorter distance from self-assessed moral superiority to terrorism than people realize. Perhaps Carl Jung said it best when he said:

“The world hangs by a thin thread. That thread is the [human] psyche.... Nowadays, we are not threatened by elemental catastrophes... **We** are the great danger.”

I imagine that some of you may again be thinking that I am being overly dramatic... If so, ask yourself what *you truly* thought the chances were five years ago that every member of an entire political party would render themselves sycophants to a leader devoid a moral compass, bringing the very foundations of our democracy into question. I suggest that if you think the psyches of those on the left are any more resilient than those on the right, you may want to dig a little deeper into history...

All of this said, let me spend the last five or so minutes here talking more concretely about love's place in this revolution.

Carl Jung was spot on. The world does hang by the thin thread of the human psyche. And Bell Hooks was absolutely right: in the absence of love "we risk moving into a wilderness of spirit so intense we may never find our way home again."

With both of these thoughts in mind, I want to suggest that it is urgent that we find a way to return to an ethic of love as the grounding principle from which we liberal religious people do our work in the world. When I think about this, it seems to me a question is being begged here, namely, why have we abandoned love in the first place?

I believe we have abandoned love because we misapprehend what love is. When most people think of love, they think something along the lines of what the apostle Paul wrote about love: "Love is patient. Love is kind. Love is not boastful, envious, arrogant, or rude. Love does not insist on its own way..." etc.

As poetically alluring as this definition of love is, I think it is overly romantic and misguided in its pacifism. I think it fails to express the innate power and transformational potential of love.

Invoking the gospel one more time, I think of The Gospel of John, where we read that "Those who love know God and those who do not love do not know God." In other words, if one acts from love, one acts in accordance with God's will. In secular terms this means that love is our highest human attribute.

Whether speaking in spiritual or secular terms, does this not mean that we are called to act from love and perhaps even to *become* love ourselves? Further, does this not make love the highest ethic? I believe so. And I believe certain things follow from the ethic of love:

The apostle Paul says that love does not insist on its own way but I think love *does* insist on its own way, for to compromise itself would be to act from a lesser ethic. With that in mind, how does love as an ethic differ from the Apostle Paul's overly romantic love and its misguided pacifism?

I think love sometimes expresses itself as righteous indignation, *though it never vilifies others.*

I think love protects the vulnerable, *though it never initiates conflict.*

I think love demands accountability, *though it never abandons forgiveness.*

I think love is unconditional, *though it does not condone all manner of being.*

I think love is unconditional, *and possess radical inclusivity as the greatest moral challenge to those who profess love.*

Hopefully you are beginning to get a sense of another way to think love of love. Rethinking love in such a way can help us to understand love the innate power and transformational potential of love. Only such love has a place in the revolution. Without such love, well, as I said last week... we know how this movie ends...

“Trust more the tensile strands of love that bend and stretch to hold you,” says Robbie. “There’s your strength. The shifting plates, the restive earth, your precious life, they *all* proceed from love, the ground on which we walk together.”

My friends, let us always remember to make beauty for one another and let love have jurisdiction.