

God As Love, Lover, and Beloved

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Cedar Lane Unitarian Universalist Church

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Chalice Lighting Friends, we light the chalice today in remembrance of the pure place within each of us that has thirsted for love, for tenderness, for a strength that helps and does not harm, for an integrity of honest laughter and high purpose, for God. We light this chalice in remembrance and in honoring of this pure place of trust within each of us that has been suckered and lied to, led down many hurtful or mean or misbegotten blind alleys, that has gotten itself beaten up in life, but with unimaginable resilience and a strength born of the same purity of intention as its fragility has brought us all this far to this place, here, today, together.

May this time be a celebration of this good, honest, fragile-yet-strong heart and soul within us all.

It is this majestic core within us that the Iranian poet Hafiz celebrated in poems such as this one:

“The Jeweler”

If a naive and desperate man

Brings a precious stone

To the only jeweler in town,

Wanting to sell it,

The jeweler’s eyes

Will begin to play a game,

Like most eyes in the world when they look at you.

The jeweler’s face will stay calm.

He will not want to reveal the stone’s true value,

But to hold the man captive to fear and greed

While he calculates

The value of the transaction.

But one moment with me, my dear,

Will show you

That there is nothing,

Nothing

Hafiz wants from you.

When you sit before a Master like me,

Even if you are a drooling mess,

My eyes sing with Excitement—

They see your Divine Worth.

Readings:

“A Golden Compass”

Forget every idea of right and wrong
Any classroom ever taught you

Because

An empty heart, a tormented mind,
Unkindness, jealousy and fear

Are always the testimony
You have been completely fooled!

Turn your back on those
Who would imprison your wondrous spirit With deceit and lies.

Come, join the honest company Of the King’s beggars—
Those gamblers, scoundrels and divine clowns
And those astonishing fair courtesans
Who need Divine Love every night.

Come, join the courageous
Who have no choice
But to bet their entire world
That indeed,
Indeed, God is Real.

I will lead you into the Circle
Of the Beloved’s cunning thieves,
Those playful royal rogues—
The ones you can trust for true guidance
Who can aid you
In this Blessed Calamity of life.

“Would You Think It Odd?”

Would you think it odd if Hafiz said,
“I am in love with every church
And mosque
And temple
And any kind of shrine

Because I know it is there
That people say the different names
Of the One God.”

Would you tell your friends
I was a bit strange if I admitted
I am indeed in love with every mind
And heart and body.

O I am sincerely
Plumb crazy
About your every thought and yearning
And limb

Because, my dear,
I know
That it is through these
That you search for Him

(Ibid.,pp. 45, 27)

Spoken Prayer Majestic reality of this cosmos, heart of our hearts and blessing beyond imagining of the life we are given in this world of wonders, we take this time to slowly quiet our breathing so that we may let go of the flurry of our daily lives and remember our basic, marvelous origin in this common miracle we call life, we call love, we call God, we call universe. Known to us in moments of ecstasy, of wondrous insight, of profound peace, of transforming love, this majestic inheritance of each of us, of all of us together, we humbly, exaltedly, thankfully remember and claim. Given such an inheritance, given such a chance, given this life we live, we would live lives of decency and compassion, of mercy and of justice-making. We would take this chance in all the ways that come before us and that we may seek out, to live out the highest aspiration of our heart and mind, of the unique soul that is the jewel of greatest worth we possess, our genius, our godsend, our purpose. In silence we commune with our highest aspiration, the very fountain of God, of Goddess, of the sacred, of truth and beauty, within....(Silence)

Reading: “ I Follow Barefoot”

I long for You so much
I follow barefoot Your frozen tracks

That are high in the mountains
That I know are years old.

I long for You so much
I have even begun to travel
Where I have never been before.

Hafiz, there is no one in this world
Who is not looking for God.

Everyone is trudging along
With as much dignity, courage
And style
As they possibly can.

(p.57, The Subject tonight is Love: 60 Wild and Sweet Poems of Hafiz, trans. Daniel Ladinsky)

Sermon My hope for our peace with the people of Iran comes largely from the realization that Hafiz is the acclaimed and beloved national poet of that country, loved by all Iranians, memorized and quoted by them. From the few poems I've read you this morning you can catch a sense of the jolly, tender, loving tone of him that so endears him to this people. What is perhaps less clear is that as a Sufi he was a heretic there, run out of his home town several times, losing his teaching jobs, because of his unorthodox religious views.

It is as if the whole population of the United States had memorized the poems of Emily Dickinson or passages from Ralph Waldo Emerson, even the fundamentalists, and quoted her or him with love, these heretics, these great souls. Wouldn't that be a nice country to live in! So I hold out great hope for the Iranian people who have ensconced a glorious heretic at the heart of their national culture.

The reason Hafiz was a heretic was the same reason Al Hallaj, his fellow Sufi poet, was crucified upside down by the orthodox of his day: both refused to say that God was totally other than they. They refused to believe that the divine was only externally located, out there somewhere, which is where the orthodox almost always place the sacred object of their devotion. God to them is usually external.

You remember in our Western Christian history how John Calvin magnified the glory of an external God by granting him all power and thus taking it away from us humans - predestination is the term. God was glorified; we were correspondingly abased. Same in orthodox Islam; I think also in orthodox Judaism. Of course there is truth in this viewpoint, since in one way of seeing things we're all flyspecks compared to the immensity of the cosmos. God's put-down of Job is valid in a way - where **were** we when the oceans were formed? (Although that's actually a very interesting question which the Buddhists take up.)

But something is also missed in this viewpoint, something the humanists in the last several centuries have pointed out, something the mystics have always known and celebrated: we, too, are part of this wonder we traditionally call God, or Goddess, or the Holy One, or simply silence. We, too, at our core, at our heart, in our soul, are made, not just of star-stuff, but of the very power that created star-stuff. The holy is not just off there somewhere, in heaven, you name it. The sacredness is at our core. **We** are sacred. **We** are holy. Not as a boast, because if you take the sacred and the holy, the wondrous, the magnificent seriously, then there is no boasting in our being part of this - but thanks, and joy, and power, and great dignity, all with great love and mercy all around. Think about it. How could our emotion be otherwise in being flesh of flesh, bone of bone, spirit of spirit, emotion of emotion, intellect of intellect, of one common beyond-our-ability-to-capture-in-language reality?

The orthodox have always been afraid such a realization would make us too big for our britches, would puff us up with pride and make us do horrible things thinking we were so great and everyone else so small. But those who have awoken to this common wondrous reality we all share and are part of and that ties us together have always found not pride, but glorious humility there, not wounding of others, but great, great compassion and sharing there, not huge personal britches expanded to the max, but rather a delight, and an enjoyment in being released from the tyrannical confines of ego concerns. That's why the Iranians love Hafiz, because he calls them humorously and lovingly back to that sacred, joyous reality again and again in a caravan that indeed knows no despair, though we've all broken our vows a thousand times, though we all are often drooling messes.

To Hafiz, it's ok. We're human. But what humans! Of what divine worth! Of what luminous jeweled brightness when we are worth our salt!

That's why, to the Sufis, God is Love, Lover, and Beloved. Love, because it's the most direct and clearest expression of this whole fact of interconnection realized and celebrated and acknowledged. Lover, because this central place in us that yearns for this glorious connection, the aspirant, the seeker in us, the place of deep insight, of sacred feeling, is in fact part of this great unified connection calling out for union. And then, too, thirdly, the Beloved, our formulation of the divine, our external object of devotion or quest is our unique sense and depiction of this awesome reality we both embody and adore. The whole process, all the parts, the whole shebang, God, the divine, the sacred, the of worth, is external, internal, and process.

Now I know I've just introduced another trinity into a unitarian church, and you can throw this threesome out with the same resounding thump the last one got booted with. But I beg you to remember that this is just a formulation, not an article of faith. This is just a way Hafiz and his company of King's beggars, gamblers, scoundrels, divine clowns and astonishing fair courtesans - those royal rogues - reminded each other and us that this whole sacred game is not realized by directing all our attention out there somewhere. It is known here (pointing to heart), and here (pointing to between us all), as well as here (pointing to the sky.) Make it a continuum rather than a trinity, for that is the point anyway. The point for us westerners, for whom the divine has always been predominantly external, is owning within ourselves the divinity we seek outside. As Ralph Waldo Emerson put it so well, "within us is the soul of the whole."

The dictionary definition of Sufi is Islamic mystic, but they always called themselves the "wise ones," those who realized the common depth beneath all the religious traditions, who experienced the reality behind the linguistic and liturgical forms. That is why Hafiz in his poem was happy at any shrine of whatever faith. In this the Sufis mirror our Unitarian Universalist stance here in the West of honoring the insights of all the religious traditions. We just like to dwell a lot in the land of thinking and insight; the Sufis want the opening of the heart and the actual experience of unity. They are actually very close to being the Eastern version of the Universalists, for in our tradition it was the Universalists who most clearly pointed to love as the path to God, for to them God is love. So, too with the Sufis. As Hafiz puts it elsewhere: "There is only one reason/ We have followed God into this world:/ To encourage laughter, freedom, dance,/ And love."

So love is the divine itself. That yearning, that nostalgia within each of us is the calling of the universe itself with us for connection, participation, joy. And love is the way this connection we all feel and know in our guts is made real. Here's Hafiz having a ball in this land of love: "I Cherish Your Ears" (p .54, The Subject Tonight is Love)

Dear pilgrim,

I love your shoes, your coat,
Your pants, your hat, your furry head,

Your cup, your bowl,
Your messy closets,

And most of all—I cherish your cute ears.

Why? Don't ask!

Just speak what you love about me.

Come closer if you are feeling
A little timid today
Or dense

Because surely you would find something
Very endearing about
Hafiz.

Then
We can pass many years
Talking so silly,

Like two highly advanced aspirants—
Like two emancipated holy vagrants
Who are sharing His Bottle
Of Truth

And feeling so damn good
And Drunk and Free.

The Sufism I learned from Pir Vilayat Khan contained this great sense of compassion and freedom along with a great sense of dignity, even nobility, from the realization of divinity within. It also embodied a wide spirit, where the various religious traditions are seen as different notes in a symphony — different, but in harmony. His great-grandfather was the first Muslim to be taken as a student by a Hindu holy singer in India. His father was a great Indian musician and teacher, his mother an American relative of Mary Baker Eddy. His sister Noor Inayat Khan, code-named Madeleine, was the last remaining radio operator for the French underground in Paris just before D Day. Free, universal, heart-centered, tender and incredibly strong and noble at the same time, each issue of Scientific American read to keep apace, aimed always at the perfection of love, harmony, and beauty - that's the Sufism of Vilayat, very akin in spirit to Unitarian Universalism.

I strongly believe the world has great need now of traditions such as ours and the Sufis that reach out beyond the parochialism of the various traditions, that keep that vision of freedom, and harmony, and non-possessive love alive, that honor that deep yearning at our core for love not tied down by doctrines.

And the glorious thing, my friends, the really glorious thing, is that that love does not just reside in us alone. It is the very heart of hearts of each one of us. Feel the power of it in this room residing in us all. We each are not alone. And our common strength in love is as beautiful and as strong and alive as our yearnings and our highest aspirations make it.

So lets close with a dance. (“From you I receive, to you I give” dance)