

You've Got to Be Carefully Taught

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First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)
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February 12, 2017

Readings

“You’ve Got to Be Carefully Taught”
lyrics from the song in the musical “South Pacific”
by Richard Rodgers Oscar Hammerstein

You've got to be taught
To hate and fear,
You've got to be taught
From year to year,
It's got to be drummed
In your dear little ear
You've got to be carefully taught.

You've got to be taught to be afraid
Of people whose eyes are oddly made,
And people whose skin is a different shade,
You've got to be carefully taught.

You've got to be taught before it's too late,
Before you are six or seven or eight,
To hate all the people your relatives hate,
You've got to be carefully taught!

Matthew 18:1-4

At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?”² And calling to him a child, he put the child in the midst of them³ and said, “Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.⁴ Whoever humbles himself or herself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

Sermon

Thirty-four years and a few months ago I first looked into the eyes of our oldest child, Sandra. And in those first moments of her life, as I looked into her eyes, I fell madly, hopelessly, in love.

It happened all over again with Adam, with Eliza... and just a year-and-a-half ago with our grandson, Lowell.

Utterly natural, this falling in love. Whether with a child or a romantic partner. We look into the eyes, really look, and we fall into that well, that ocean, of love.

We are, the Bible proclaims, made in the image of God. So – if this is true, and if God is, as scripture also affirms, love... then so are we! Of course! Love.

And whether or not the language of scripture is our language, isn't it clear that love is completely natural? So that we have not to learn love, but only to awaken to love, awaken to the love all around us, like the water in which a fish swims... but may not notice precisely because the water is so all-encompassing?

Whereas hate, by contrast, must be taught. The *potential* to hate is clearly there and can be awakened by fear, by greed, by a certain sort of self-preservation. But hate just doesn't seem to me to be as natural as love.

This is, I think, why the song from "South Pacific" we heard earlier rings true. You must be taught to hate and fear, to hate the ones your relatives hate, to hate those who look or act differently from you.

Young children in fact don't much notice these differences until someone points them out. That should tell us something – and is another reason the song rings true.

"South Pacific," as you may know, was produced in 1949. It received rave reviews in many quarters, including praise for addressing racism; but it was controversial for some. For us, from the perspective of 2017, we can say that though the musical trafficked in some of the racial and cultural stereotypes of the era, it even so made a powerful statement on behalf of mutual understanding, and acceptance of human diversity. That this would be controversial for anyone was a comment on those earlier times. Just as the reality that the heart of the message is more relevant today than ever... is a comment on our times.

Now, this sermon is derived from my conversation with Dana Kintigh, who was the high bidder for a sermon topic at our Merrie Market auction.

Our conversation began with Dana's observation of newborn kittens – who appeared to him to be naturally sweet and loving.

But, I asked, as the kittens become cats they become hunters and killers – without question a potential they were born with.

And can't a case be made that it is the same with human beings? Sure, the newborn baby looks and is quite harmless, beautiful, innocent... but babies too can grow up to be mean... even to be killers.

Yet here's the thing: Yes, some babies grow up to be mean and cruel, but more others grow up to be kind and generous and mostly loving.

So it would seem that at the very least each human being has the capacity to go in either direction... whether the odds favor love or not... which means of course it is up to parents as well as the larger society in the form of schools along with the examples we set as fellow human beings and the examples set by our leaders... to nurture the one and not the other.

But I don't want to let go of my earlier distinction: It does seem to me that love, inborn, just needs to be awakened (or from time to time re-awakened) in us; whereas hate, not as natural as love, needs to be taught.

As for the role of religion?

First, religion awakens love – and love's companion, goodness – by lifting up moral and ethical principles and values, rules to live by: Whether the Ten Commandments, the teachings of Jesus or the sayings of Mohammed, or the Eightfold Path of Buddhism, and so on.

Second, and more deeply transformatively, religion at its best awakens love and goodness through spiritual practices of prayer, contemplation, meditation – practices

designed to help us tap into the heart's core of love, to connect with what the teacher Eknath Easwaran called, in a book by the same name, original goodness.

For Sufis in the tradition of Islam, the idea is to *remember* who we truly are, namely part and parcel of God, which means individual manifestations of universal love.

Christians might put it this way, that we are recovering or discovering the experience that we are all children of God.

Hindus affirm that through meditation we discover and experience that our individual self or soul is at one with the universal Self, or Brahman.

And so on.

So, reinforcing my point, in none of these instances is the practice of prayer, contemplation, meditation meant to help us achieve something that we are not already at our core. Rather, each of these practices is meant to, as Easwaran also wrote, *recover* something we have been all along, to open to what he elsewhere described as the infinite reservoir of love that is simply “waiting to be discovered and manifested in our daily life” – manifest as goodness, as kindness, as generosity: companion virtues, as I like to call them, of love.

The first principle of our own Unitarian Universalism names something very much like Easwaran's idea of original goodness, or a core of love, in the words which affirm “the inherent worth and dignity” of every person.

We may, though, be inclined to say, “Really?” After all, how can anyone even just glance at the front page or watch cable news for more than a few minutes and still affirm the inherent worth and dignity of *every* person: even the rapist... the murderer... the terrorist? Make your own list.

Well, my response to this is that maybe we are indeed each and every one of us born with inherent worth and dignity, which we could think of as an inherited bank account of worth and dignity... a bank account that by extension includes love and goodness. Yet then, in the course of our lives we can either grow the account or squander it.

In this regard... another metaphor:

On the corner at the end of our street is an old house. For years it was looking a little worse for wear, needed at least a fresh paint job, and who knew what else. Well, when the woman who lived there died a year or two ago, her family put the house on the market. Beautiful old trees came down and, as siding and window frames came down too, it looked as though the house itself was going to be next.

But in the last couple of weeks there has been a flurry of activity on the corner. Turns out the old house is not going anywhere; it is just growing.

It's as if that old house had original goodness and beauty (certainly character) – and after investigation it was determined that there was no need to tear it down all together and build from scratch. Rather, clean it up, enlarge, and build on that original goodness and character.

I may be stretching this metaphor. But I expect you get my meaning.

That if an old house can be transformed, fixed up and enlarged... maybe even an old human being can too, heart and soul enlarging, becoming more generous, more loving. How? By tapping into what was always there despite whatever accretions of lesser qualities there had been over the years, maybe the result of hurt or worse, but not manifesting our essential selves, what Easwaran called our original goodness, a concept he affirmed that could “transform our lives.” Maybe the world too.

And not looking through rose colored glasses, Easwaran realistically wrote that the idea of original goodness “does not deny what traditional religion calls sin...” (after

all, look around!) – “it simply reminds us that before original sin was original innocence. That is our real nature.” Which assumes, once again, that, as Easwaran put it, “we do not have to work to draw this kind of love from some external source. A full reservoir of love is lying right inside us.” We just have to awaken to it, peel away layers of other stuff to find it afresh.

A more ancient teacher, Jesus, as we heard in the first reading, said that to enter the kingdom of heaven we need to turn and become like a child. So it sounds as though Jesus too believed that children were born with a natural innocence and goodness – as he invited his listeners to recover or discover or nourish that spirit in themselves. (After all, even a perfect seed needs water and sunlight to grow and become a beautiful plant or tree.)

I want to draw toward a close by quoting President Abraham Lincoln, whose actual birthday is today, February 12. He wrote or said:

“When I do good, I feel good. When I do bad, I feel bad. That’s my religion.”

A deceptively simple statement. Which it seems to me is Lincoln’s down to earth naming of conscience, or what the philosopher Kant called the “moral law within” – all of which Lincoln seems to be *assuming*... maybe yet another way of naming original goodness, our heart’s core of love.

Literally true? Or a useful assumption?

Maybe it doesn’t matter, maybe we can never know for certain anyway. Yet even simply assuming inborn love and goodness – whatever else might also be inborn – just might give us the confidence to heed what Lincoln called the “better angels of our natures,” might encourage us to continue in the work of awakening the children in our lives to their better angels of goodness and love, might remind us that we can through our example help others to heed their better angels.

We do also know, often from bitter experience, that we sometimes can be pushed or pulled into behavior we might regret – but Lincoln reminds us that we indeed do have an inner compass, a compass we experience in the quite direct and simple terms named: does our behavior make us feel good or bad? Nothing mysterious or mystical here. We have only to pay attention here and now and always, as best we can.

For the longer term over the course of our lives? We can continue to plumb our inner depths – whether through reading and reflection, or more formal practices or routines of prayer and meditation – discovering or recovering a kindness and generosity and love in more fullness than we might have imagined possible. Yet which just perhaps might have been there from the start, only to be revealed, uncovered, rediscovered.

And which then and always must be not only a private love, eye to eye – parent and child, romantic partners, sisters and brothers, dear friends... so natural... – but must grow from there, as Jesus surely knew, and Lincoln too, along with all the prophets and great leaders of humanity... who knew that love (and the practice of love’s companion virtues...) must ever grow to become a love which infuses our social and political lives, love manifest as community-making, justice-making, peacemaking.

For in the end poet Mary Oliver’s question must become ours:

There is only one question:
how to love this world

This, all of this, more important now than ever.

So may it be.