

# **“Love Is The Spirit”**

A Sermon delivered by Reverend Marlin Lavanhar  
At All Souls Unitarian Church in Tulsa, OK, Sunday, February 1, 2009

The great Disciples of Christ minister Dr. Fred Craddock tells of a time when he took a rather interesting road trip. He says:

*“I recall some years ago being asked to go some distance to a meeting. A fellow going to the same meeting lived near me and said, “You want a ride?”*

*I said, “Yeah,” saving the gasoline, the tear and wear.*

*He said, “I’ll stop by for you.”*

*When he came by, in the back seat were his wife, whom I had not met, and a daughter. She had just graduated from college, a very attractive young woman. They were already in the back seat and said, “Sit up there and y’all can talk.”*

*I said, “All right.”*

*They said, “We’re not going to the meeting; we’re just going shopping.” So we started out on this 200 mile trip.*

*We had gone about 25 miles, and his wife, sitting directly behind him, said, “You’re going too slow.” So he sped up. Then she said, “You’re going to kill us all.” And he slowed down. Then she said, “We’ll never get there.”*

*“Are you going to pass here?” she asked? So he didn’t pass. She said, “Why are you waiting in line?” He started to pass around when she said, “You’re going to pass all these cars?” So he got back in line. She said, “Don’t you see the yellow line? We’re in the wrong lane.” Pick, pick, pick, pick, pick.*

*Pretty soon the daughter joined in, and this man was sitting there in silence. I was all embarrassed. What do you do? You don’t want to be there; you’d rather be walking. So what do you do? I just sat there kind of stewing. I said to myself, if this fellow were a man, if he really were a man, he’d pull his car over and leave a couple. Then he and I would go on to our meeting. Well, the farther we traveled, the more I began to say to myself, “Now if this fellow were a man... because I couldn’t take it.*

*When we got there, the wife and daughter went shopping. In the end I had a few minutes, and he said, “You want some coffee?”*

*I said, "Fine." We went into a little place, and we sat there staring at the coffee. What do you say? How do you start a conversation? I knew, and he knew, and he knew that I knew. What do you do? I was just staring at my coffee as though it were real interesting coffee.*

*Finally he asked, "Fred, you teach in seminary?"*

*I said, "Yeah, yeah."*

*He said, "I mean you're into religion and all that?"*

*"Yeah."*

*"I mean, you know the Bible and Christianity?"*

*"Yeah. What are you talking about?"*

*He said, "I just wondered, in your study and in your opinion, what hope do you think there is for a man who has everything in life at age 50, everything in life he wants, except the one thing he wants the most?"<sup>i</sup>*

Everything in life... everything he wants... except the one thing he wants the most?" What is it? What is it – that we want the most? Is it respect, peace of mind, happiness, satisfaction? Is it lots of money? Or recognition? Are we sure we really know what we want most? Are we sure that what we think we want, is what we are really yearning for? Many of us come to church to be reminded of what is most important in life, or at least to have a place where we can try to figure it out. So you would think that here we would have an answer to this question. Or at least a path upon which we can guide people in their effort to realize the answer.

But does the church really know how to lead us to where we most want to go? Some of the things people seem to be looking for today when they come to church are: peace of mind in a troubling world, a place where they can feel comfortable and comforted. They often look for people who are like them.

I think of my colleague Rev. Tony Larson in Racine, Wisconsin who remembers years ago when the Catholic Church added the "Kiss of Peace" to the mass. (That's the part of the service where you're told to turn to your neighbor and shake hands and say, "May the peace of Christ be with you.") Tony says, "...at one mass that I attended, someone turned to me and said, 'May the *unrest* of Christ be with you,' and it struck me then, that most of what Jesus talked about when he was alive was not very comforting. It was more unrestful than peaceful." Tony continues, "I've since come to see that it would be just as appropriate to say, 'May the unrest of Buddha be with you,' or 'the unrest of Susan B. Anthony, [or Sojourner Truth]' or 'the unrest of the Jewish

prophets.” He concludes, “It doesn’t matter so much who your saviors or models for living are. What does matter is that you have some of their unrest.”<sup>ii</sup>

Now let’s be honest, it is risky in this consumer culture of ours, where people go “church shopping” to find the right community for themselves and their families, to be peddlers of spiritual unrest. Shoppers like to leave feeling satisfied. But as Rev. Julianne Silberman reminds us, “Here in the church, we’re not in the satisfaction business.” If satisfaction is what we’re looking for, we should go to a place like a day spa – where satisfaction *is* their business.

We have to ask and remind ourselves occasionally: what business are we in? I agree with Michael Durall on this question, who in his upcoming book describes the church as being in the business of “creating spiritually mature people.” That is to say, people who embody the qualities of courage, generosity and compassion, people who understand the value of sacrifice and have the tools to forgive and the capacity to love. So in this time when there are competing ideas about the role of the church, in this time of ever more elaborate church-growth strategies and marketing plans, let us remember what our central purpose is. And as this active, thriving congregation knows quite well, creating “spiritually mature people” does not just come from passing the peace or offering services and sermons that serve to satisfy some simplistic sense of spiritual satisfaction and emotional uplift.

The people who come to this church have always come for depth and for commitment to something much bigger than themselves. That is why this church has risen to become the nation’s largest in our denomination. Here at All Souls we are not afraid of the church’s prophetic call upon our lives. And we are not afraid to bear our part of that call.

But let’s be honest, fear would be an appropriate posture. Because this life (if we are awake) is often fierce, and living with integrity is dangerous and complicated. There are costs we must bear and losses we must endure. In other words, in this house of worship, no one is offering sub-market loans at no cost with easy terms. We don’t offer guaranteed returns on your investment. We’re not even FDIC insured. There is risk involved in investing with us. There is the risk of gaining something less than the real thing. A risk that you will have everything in life you want, except for the one thing you want and need the most. There is a risk that you could think you have earned a profit, but realize that you have really sustained a loss. Rev. Ken MacLean once said, “The problem with religion is there’s no quality control.” For the most part, it is an unregulated industry.

Some faiths claim that religion is personal, and these paths emphasize personal spiritual practice and personal transformation as their central purpose. Other faiths emphasize the public

nature of religion and therefore focus on trying to bend the world toward justice. And the fact is that they are both 100% half right. Each approach to religion is anemic by itself. Each has a shadow that we ignore at our peril. Religion that is overly focused on spiritual practice (and the things of the invisible world) can lead to an addiction to transcendence. People can become intoxicated by their personal spiritual lives, and it can be as much of an escape from reality as any other addiction. We have all met such people who seem to float just a few inches above the earth and whose religion makes them aloof in a world riddled with genocide, sexual abuse, AIDS orphans, hungry children, gang violence, tsunamis, terrorism and war. The danger of an overly spiritual or mystical focus is people can become addicted to transcendence.

On the other hand, people who focus first and foremost on social justice can easily become self-righteous and angry. You've met these people too! However, Rumi scholar Andrew Harvey likes to say, when you combine the passion and discipline of the spiritual mystic with the passion and energy of the activist -- you create a kind of nuclear energy. It is the spiritual version of splitting the atom. It unleashes a depth of energy that fuels an unstoppable force. The reason is that such social activism is not rooted in anger and self-righteousness, but in love. In divine love. In *agape*.

Doing the spiritual work helps us cultivate a fearless love. It helps cool us down when we get too hot. It heats us up when we get too cool. It brings us peace when the unrest is too much to bear, and it stirs our unrest when our peace becomes passivity. Spiritual practice helps create an alchemy that turns our fear and anger into fearless love. And there is nothing more dangerous to the status quo than fearless love. That's the kind of love that animated Jesus, and Martin Luther King Jr., and Mahatma Gandhi, Dorothy Day, and Dorothea Dix. And that is the kind of love we are called to cultivate and to give away.

This is what we mean when we say "Love is the Spirit of this Church!" There will be times when the church will be our staff of comfort and peace, as we walk through the valley of the shadows of death and despair. Yet, there must also be other times when the church will reflect the God of Deuteronomy 32:11, who is "...like an eagle that stirs up its nest, that flutters over its young." It will stir us up... and push us out of the nest. Or in the words of Rumi, we are called to: "Load the ship and set out. [Even when] no one knows for certain whether the vessel will sink or reach the harbor." We must risk the ocean. It is much more important than losing or making money. It is about our connection to God!

So, work in the invisible world at least as hard as you do in the visible. And be "companions with the prophets." We must choose our traveling partners very carefully. There

will never be a shortage of voices (or backseat drivers) clamoring to tell us which way to go. The key is to have faithful guides and worthy companions. Because in the end, what have you profited if you have gained the whole world, but lost your soul?

It is onto this journey, unto the heights and the depths of spiritual maturity, through tending the invisible as well as the visible things, that we are invited once again each time we walk into All Souls. May its peace and its unrest be upon you, this morning and all the days of our life together.

Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Craddock, Fred, Craddock Stories. Chalice Press. St. Louis, MO. 2001 Pp. 60-61.

<sup>ii</sup> Larson, Tony, "May the Unrest of Christ Be with You." Quest Vol. LIV No. 1 September 1996. Church of the Larger Fellowship, Boston, MA. Pp. 1.