

“The Journey of Love”
 Rev. Jan K. Nielsen, Ministerial Candidate
 The Unitarian Universalist Church of Little Rock
 May 3, 2015

*“For this purpose we were created,
 to learn to love and to learn to be loved.”*
 - Mother Teresa

When Roger and I packed up the family minivan,
 left Van Buren and headed north,
 I thought we’d be away just long enough
 for me to study for the ministry.
 We planned to be back soon.
 Maybe you’ve heard the wise saying:
“If you want to make God laugh, tell her your plans.”
 A life fully lived, I’ve learned, cannot be fully planned.
 It’s taken us awhile to find our way back to Arkansas,
 but after five years of divinity school
 and thirteen years of ministry -
 all while raising our three kids to their first steps toward adulthood -
 here we are, ready and hoping to come home.

My time with all of you this week
 has felt like nothing less than a homecoming.
 From the time I was greeted at the airport
 after my delayed flight arrived in the middle of a rainy night
 until yesterday’s grand brunch complete with platters of great food
 and vases of purple iris on all the tables,
 I have felt the warmth and goodness of your welcome.
 Someone remembered that the iris
 is a favorite flower for Roger and me and purple, my soul color.
 Thank you all for your kindness and for your gracious hospitality.
 The truth is: I have never felt so deeply welcomed anywhere in my life.

You have welcomed me with open minds and open hearts.
 This Arkansas girl has been away awhile;
 you can tell by the way I talk.
 A lot of the time I say “y’all” just like always
 but sometimes this week you’ve also heard me say “you guys” –
 and sometimes I’ve surprised myself even
 and said “y’all” and “you guys” both in the same sentence.
 It’s like a part of my voice never left Arkansas
 and another part is stuck somewhere on the New Jersey turnpike.
 You might say my voice has become a hybrid,
 a blend that reflects the path of my journey, so far.
 You have welcomed me just as I am, right now, and I am grateful.

Last week, I promised always to be real –
 to be who I am and say what I think and feel
 and I asked the same of all of you.
 All week long, I think we did it –
 I felt complete freedom here among you
 to be who I am and say what I think and feel, and that is a blessing.
 And from what I can tell, all of you were real with me.
 When it came time to speak what was on your minds and hearts,
 none of y'all seemed to hold back anything at all!
 You let me know what you love about your church
 and also what you don't.
 You let me know what you hope will never change around here
 and also what you wish would change tomorrow, if not sooner.
 And I know that this may not come as a surprise
 but -- you all don't always agree with one another! – and that is okay.

This gathering of souls may not agree on the details of church life,
 or on politics, or on questions about life and meaning.
 We don't have to think alike, goes the saying, to love alike –
 and the fact that these hallowed words
 may originate not from the 16th century Unitarian, Francis David,
 to whom they are often attributed,
 but instead from the 18th century Methodist, Charles Wesley,
 in my mind, only underscores their universality and bolsters their power.
 What's important is not that the people all agree all the time;
 what is paramount is that the people of a congregation feel free
 to be real with one another –
 to speak freely and openly about what we doubt
 and about what we have come to believe,
 to raise questions about anything
 and also to name the truths we have come to know in our bones,
 to sing Hallelujah and to sit in silence.
 Here in this gathering of souls,
 what matters is that we can be real with one another,
 for that realness, I said last week, is the first step
 toward learning the most important lesson of life's journey:
 how to love and how let ourselves be loved.
 Only by being real can we begin to love.

Love, I believe, is why we are here, alive together, now
 in this time and in this place.
 It doesn't matter to me
 what you may or may not believe
 or how, or even whether, you choose to name the holy.
 What matters to me is that you live with your heart open to love.
 And don't think I am talking about sappy sentimentality;
 a life fully lived with devotion to the way of love
 may be the most meaningful

as well as the most demanding way to live the human journey.
 Love is both life-giving and hard.
 “Get a life in which you are not alone,”
 writes Anna Quindlen.
 “Find people you love, and who love you.
 And remember,” she wisely says, “that love is not leisure, it is work.”
 Anna Quindlen’s words speak truth.
 In life and in love,
 we will all stumble and fall;
 we will all, at times, have to find our way back to the path of love –
 a journey both human and spiritual.
 I believe we are here together
 to do the work of learning the way of love.

Love, teaches Pattiann Rogers, is essential,
 both for our survival
 and also for the continued unfolding and evolution of all creation.
 “Maybe the creation,” she says, “is not finished.”
 I agree: our world, as beautiful as it can be, is far from finished.
 This week we looked out into our broken world
 and saw hopelessness erupt
 into flames of violence in the streets of Baltimore
 a sight that broke my heart, again, and tore at my soul.
 Roger and I have a daughter away at college in Baltimore
 but my tears, I later realized,
 were not just for my concerns about the safety of our child.
 My tears were for Baltimore, for our nation
 and for parents and people everywhere
 in this land where too many have too little,
 this land where we still have not learned what it means to love,
 especially when loving is complicated and hard.
 We have work to do in Baltimore and in Ferguson and in Little Rock and all across our land –
 for our very survival depends upon our work and our love.
 “We can express love to a universe that requires it,”
 Pattiann Rogers reminds us, “give love despite fear,
 despite horror and grief, despite suffering, despite our ignorance,
 love unconditionally,” she says, “despite death.”
 This land of ours and its people need our love.

Today we decide, you and I,
 whether we are ready to journey together.
 Where we go and what we do
 won’t matter as much in the end
 as how we travel together along the way.
 I envision a ministry centered in love.
 We won’t always all agree on all the travel plans –
 neither the stops we make along with way
 nor the stories we tell

about what we have seen and heard and learned.
 What matters is not that we are all alike,
 as if we could be, or would want to be.
 What matters most to me is that we give our best to the work
 of growing hearts big enough and strong enough
 to love one another and ourselves, unconditionally,
 no exceptions, no matter what.
 This is what we will teach our children,
 even if it is a lesson some of the grown-ups of our world
 may not yet have learned:
 to treat other people the way you would want to be treated,
 no matter who they are or what they look like,
 no matter the language they speak or the place they call home.
 Whatever our journey may bring and wherever it may take us,
 we will journey together in love.

For a long time now,
 I have felt called to come home,
 to be here and to minister alongside all of you.
 Looking back at where I have been
 and what I have learned along the way,
 I can now see that everything I have ever done,
 and every place I have stopped along the way,
 has prepared me to be your minister.
 I left Arkansas to follow a calling to the ministry
 and now I sense that my calling is leading me back home,
 to a place and a people who have, for most of my years,
 to quote Iris DeMent,
 “own(ed) a piece of my heart and soul.”
 Over my years away,
 a yearning to return rose up in my heart
 and would not leave me alone.
 And so now, I am ready - ready to give my heart to you,
 the people of this congregation,
 ready to give my heart to the work
 of bringing our Unitarian Universalist message of love and hope
 to Little Rock, to Arkansas, and beyond - to our land.
 I am ready to join you on the journey of love.

And now I would like for all of y'all to help me finish this sermon:
 Stand up if you and your life partner
 were married here in this sanctuary.
 Stand up if this congregation dedicated your child or grandchild.
 Stand up if you have laid to rest the ashes of one of your loved ones
 in your church's beautiful Memorial Woodlands here.
 Stand up if you have celebrated the life of a loved one
 at a memorial service here in this sanctuary.
 Stand up if this church has led you to put your faith into action

and your hands to work for others.
Stand up if our faith tradition has expanded your mind
or awakened your spirit.
Stand up if in this sanctuary you have found hope.
Stand up if in this sanctuary you have found peace.
Stand up if in this sanctuary
you have found your life changed for good.
Stand up if, this morning,
you found your way through our doors for the very first time.
Together, we are standing up for this beloved community –
the Unitarian Universalist Church of Little Rock.
We are standing up for who we are –
a people devoted to the way of love,
a people committed to bringing more love,
both to our land and to the unfolding of all creation.