

A House of Love

A homily by Rev. Fred Small
First Parish in Cambridge, Unitarian Universalist
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Ten years ago this morning, out of an immaculate blue sky, terror rained down on Manhattan and the nation.

The brutal attacks of that unforgettable day penetrated our defenses—physical, emotional, and spiritual. There were countless acts of love that day and after, but too many of us took refuge in the house of fear.

There were calls from every faith tradition for forbearance, for international cooperation, for self-examination, but in the house of fear we could not hear them. The president declared war on “evildoers.” Someone had to pay for our pain.

The United States invaded Afghanistan and then Iraq. Hundreds were imprisoned and many tortured at Guantanamo, Abu Ghraib, and locations unknown. On the streets of our own country, Muslim Americans and those mistaken for them were abused and assaulted.

Ten years later, we still eye each other suspiciously.

Just last month, folksinger Vance Gilbert, a bearded African-American, was removed from a United Airlines flight at Logan Airport and interrogated by state police, apparently because he’d been observed reading a book about antique airplanes. Meanwhile, African-American Republican presidential candidate Herman Cain vows to impose a loyalty oath on any Muslim who might wish to serve in his administration.

The house of fear is filled with crazy funhouse mirrors.

Catholic priest and theologian Henri Nouwen, who taught at Harvard Divinity School, was also a closeted gay man. He knew well the house of fear.

“Though we think of ourselves as followers of Jesus,” Henri admitted, “we are often seduced by the fearful questions the world presents to us. Without fully realizing it, we become anxious, nervous, worrying people caught in the questions of survival: our own survival; the survival of our families, friends, and colleagues; the survival of our church, our country, and our world. . . . But as soon as these so-called real issues begin to dominate our lives, we are back again in the house of fear [I]s it possible,” Henri demanded, “[I]s it possible in the midst of this fear-provoking world to live in the house of love . . . ?”

Is it possible?

It’s got to be.

For the sake of our families and friends and communities, for the sake of our beautiful imperiled planet, for the sake of our children and their children, for the sake of our own beleaguered souls, we’ve got to live in the house of love.

That’s why we come here Sunday mornings, isn’t it?

We enter, rejoice, and come in to the house of love. We bring our fears, our failures, our exhaustion, and we place them tenderly on the altar of love. We sing songs of love, pray prayers of love, dream dreams of love, stand on the side of love against all odds.

We screw up constantly and return faithfully to the house of love.

Does it matter? Does it make a difference?

Yeah. Sometimes it does.

Last month, one of our young adults, Andy Coate, was waiting for his train home after a 12-hour shift. A dad, a mom, and three kids were waiting nearby, and the dad launched into a diatribe against gay marriage.

Finally, Andy spoke up.

“Sir, you totally have the right to think and say what you like, but I had a long day at work and I’m tired of hearing how immoral I am. Would you mind finishing your tirade later?”

And then in a moment of amazing grace, Andy said, “Also, would any of you like a cupcake? We had tons left over at work.”

Here’s what happened next, in Andy’s words:

The two younger kids, seated on the bench next to me, looked at their dad. By now he just looked confused, no longer angry, and definitely unsure what to think of me.

“Can we have a cupcake, dad?” asked the younger girl. He shrugged, and they both looked back to me. I gave them a pack of four cupcakes, and they grabbed them and said thank you. The mom asked where I worked, I told her, and we laughed that one of the perks and drawbacks of working at a coffee shop was the amount of free pastry available.

I asked them if they were visiting Boston for the first time, and the dad said that he’d been before but it was the kids’ first time. We talked for over 10 minutes about Boston, and Los Angeles (where I am from) and Tennessee (where they are from) and what kinds of things to see in Boston. I looked up an address on my phone for them. We laughed that we could see into one of the hotel rooms across the street and it looked like they were jumping on the bed.

I asked what they were up to the next day, and they said that they hoped to see the Aquarium and maybe do a Duckboat tour. Needing to just sneak one little jab in there I invited them to join me at church the next morning; their faces were predictably confused.

And a couple minutes later their train came. They all said goodbye to me, the kids thanked me again for the cupcakes, and that was that. We all, at least, left the interaction smiling.

Reflecting on what happened, Andy says: “I’m so tired of fighting and fighting and fighting; of having the same argument with the same people and the same counterarguments flying my way. . . . So I offered what I had – cupcakes and advice about the city of Boston. . . . They accepted cupcakes from a stranger who they recognized they had been saying bad things about mere seconds before. . . . We all chose to interact on that human level.”

Andy chose the house of love rather than the house of fear. And for a few minutes this family from Tennessee, lured by cupcakes, joined him there.

The house of love is a place of power and healing.

Paula D’Arcy was 27 years old and three months pregnant when her husband and 21-month-old daughter were killed by a drunk driver. She writes: “Love sustained me through the deaths of my dreams and the unimaginable burying of my family. . . . I learned that darkness and grief are not the final say—they are experiences through which light is not yet visible. But light, in

the form of love, is nevertheless there. Nothing exists apart from this numinous presence. We are bathed in love while searching for love. This is the incomprehensible reality of things.”

The house of fear is strong.

We will be beset. We will be wounded. We will die—every one of us.

But the house of love endures—here at First Parish in Cambridge and here in every heart.

The door is always open.

Welcome. Bienvenidos.

Amen and Blessed Be.