

Flower Festival

Unitarian Universalist Church of Vancouver

May 11, 2025

Reflection on the Theme – Lacey Stokes

I appreciated last week when Elisha started her sermon by acknowledging that all of who we are is welcome here. I often feel like my life is fragmented into different boxes and I wonder, how often do I show up with all of who I am? The manager who runs a restaurant with precision and efficiency while also being fiercely protective of my staff. The mother who loves her children with every ounce of her being. The wild woman who likes to sing at the bar. The wife. The worship associate. The divorcee. The woman who mourns parents who are still alive. The girl who lost her best friend to a sudden coronary. The entirety of my being, every facet and angle. And if the whole of who I am is so diverse, what does it look like to see, love and accept the whole of someone else? Someone I see only as different from me?

I have a customer who has been very open about telling me how much he likes Trump. My first reaction to this man was anger and a desire to get away from the interaction. But I learned a few years ago that my first reaction is how I've been trained to think. My second reaction is who I actually am. I chose after my first reaction to practice curiosity. I asked him about other things in his life. I got to know him. He walks at the mall most days, trying to stay healthy. He lost his wife and he doesn't know how to cook so he eats out every meal. He wants to learn to cook. His name is Bob. He likes to see photos of my chickens and my dog.

We cannot have equity without diversity. There's no need for equity if we're all the same. I have long strived to be inclusive of those who are different from me. Different races, different sexualities, different identities, different cultures. It's only been recently that I've been sitting with and unpacking my own need to be inclusive of those who think differently than me as well. And I'm not suggesting we tolerate intolerance. I think we can use our voices and we can fight back against oppression and we can also choose to love those who are different from us. Otherwise I'm emulating the very thing I'm speaking out against.

When we begin to unpack the whole of who people are, I think we can find common ground and begin to build bridges that open up communication. After all, changing our country starts with changing the minds and hearts of her people and we can't do that by being enemies. My own beliefs have evolved out of how I was raised because people who were kind to me, people I loved, people who loved me, challenged those beliefs from a place of love. Because it came from a place of love, I was able to hear them.

Diversity can't just include my narrow view of what acceptable diversity is. We've been divided too long, segregated and pitted against each other. I'm choosing to stop participating in the division and build bridges to each other instead. The entirety of me, the entirety of you, the entirety of them.

***Dissenters and Other Mermaids*© by Rev. Kathryn A. Bert**

You may know that Fulghum is a Unitarian minister. His story about the mermaid among giants, wizards and dwarfs, is the expression of a deeply religious position, the heretical position, that even those who are different, who don't fit our established categories, even those who disagree with us or the majority opinion, are welcome in our churches and among our faith.

Heresy is just a term that means whatever belief is at variance with church doctrine.

Heresy is an idea which is different from an established truth, orthodoxy, or an idea that challenges what most people believe, especially those who hold the most power believe.

So, to make it easier to explain. Let me talk about gender. Many people believe that all people are divided into two categories – male and female, boys and girls, men and women. Many of us grew up with that belief and have accepted it as truth, even though there have always been people who don't fit those two categories.

I think younger people, a younger generation, accept the fact that not everyone fits into one of two categories, just like people may not fit into one of the three categories of giants, wizards and dwarfs. Perhaps you're a mermaid, and don't feel like a giant, a wizard or a dwarf. Perhaps you're nonbinary and don't feel like a girl or a boy. Or maybe you've been told you're a boy all your life, but you really feel like you're a girl, or vice versa. Categories are just groupings we've created to make sense of the world we live in.

Like vegetables and fruit. The tomato is a fruit because it develops from the flower of the tomato plant and contains seeds, but it is treated as a vegetable in cooking and stored with other vegetables in grocery stores. The Supreme Court actually weighed in and classified it as a vegetable in 1893, though really, if you define it by its plant properties, fruit would be more accurate.

Some people in Europe had religious ideas that were different from the religious ideas of those in power and so escaped to this continent to flee persecution.

Ideas like: all people are saved or have the same destiny, that God loves all their creatures. Ideas like: we come from a single source, that God is One, we and are united by our common humanity.

So it is true that people with these ideas fled Europe to settle in America. It is also true that Europeans who came to this land persecuted others – they killed and enslaved Native Americans, brought people they enslaved from Africa, and treated lots of people who were “different” as if they weren't really people. It's hard to understand that both these stories are true, but they are.

But because some of our religious ancestors came to America to escape religious persecution, they tried to protect religious freedom in this land. Because they had been discriminated against, imprisoned, and killed, for their different religious beliefs, the founders of this country – this government we now call the United States of America - protected at the time the free religious voice: which is not to say that the early America was a land of great tolerance, but strides in that direction were steadily made over the years.

Thomas Jefferson, for example, wanted to be remembered as author of the statute of Virginia for religious freedom. We remember him as both a slave holder and as an author who wrote against slavery. He was also a Unitarian.

Jefferson publicly opposed slavery throughout his life. He called it a “moral depravity” and a “hideous blot.” He even wrote that slavery presented the greatest threat to the new American nation and he wrote that slavery was contrary to the laws of nature. These beliefs were different and radical in an economy that depended upon people being forced to work for no wages. and what is hard to reconcile is the fact that Jefferson himself owned and profited from slaves.

But he wanted to be remembered as author of the statute of Virginia which reads:

We the General Assembly of Virginia do enact that no man shall be compelled to frequent or support any religious worship, place or ministry whatsoever, nor shall be enforced, restrained, molested, or burthened in his body or goods, nor shall suffer otherwise on account of his religious opinions or belief; but that all men shall be free to profess, and by agreement to maintain, their opinions in matters of religion, and that the same shall in no wise diminish, enlarge or affect their civil capacities.

It is no coincidence that this language is reminiscent of the Act of Religious Tolerance and Freedom of conscience of 1568, issued by the one and only Unitarian King in history, King John Sigismund, of Transylvania.

In every place the preachers shall preach and explain the Gospel each according to his understanding of it, and if the congregation like it, well, if not, no one shall compel them for their souls would not be satisfied, but they shall be permitted to keep a preacher whose teaching they approve. Therefore, none of the superintendents or others shall abuse the preachers, no one shall be reviled for his religion by anyone, according to the previous statutes, and it is not permitted that anyone should threaten anyone else by imprisonment or by removal from his post for his teaching, for faith is the gift of God, this comes from hearing, which hearing is by the word of God.”

Whereas it is always stunning the multitude of connections between people of different places and different times that influence how we conceive of the world, and how we try to shape it, it is also stunning to me the impact a single person, true to their convictions, can make by so stating their truth, and sticking by it.

Like our mermaid. Fulghum’s mermaid stuck by her truth within the context of a community of acceptance where, though it was believed there were only giants, wizards, and dwarfs, room was made for the one who had the conviction to so claim her unique identity and purpose and place in the world. The heretics, as we well know, are sometimes right.

Perhaps this tomato is neither fruit nor vegetable. Perhaps it is just a tomato. And this iris is just an iris, this daisy is just a daisy, and these morning glories I wear around my shoulders this morning are art made of wool to remind us that weed is just a label, and flowers are more beautiful in their variety and difference.

This flower ritual is a celebration of difference, of diversity, of the heretic and mermaid, the invasive weed and native species.

During the offertory, perhaps some children will help Kelly, Ashley and me carry the vases of flowers to the exits of our buildings, so that as you leave today – once you're done visiting, or had your coffee or tea, as you get ready to go home, you are invited to choose a flower different than you brought with you today – and if you didn't bring one, you're still welcome to take one – as that celebration of our acceptance of our difference from one another I'll close with the Consecration of the Flowers – words by Norbert Căpek to bless these flowers:

Infinite Spirit of Life, we ask thy blessing on these

thy messengers of fellowship and love.

May they remind us, amid diversities of knowledge and of gifts, to be one in desire and affection and devotion to thy holy will.

May they also remind us of the value of comradeship, of doing and sharing alike.

May we cherish friendship as one of thy most precious gifts.

*May we not let awareness of another's talents discourage us,
or sully our relationship,*

*but may we realize that whatever we can do, great or small,
the efforts of all of us are needed to do thy work in this world.*

Amen.