

February 24, 2019  
Worship Theme: Power  
Claire Feingold Thoryn

### **Call to Worship:**

Our service this morning will conclude our worship theme of Power. Next month's worship theme is Humility.

In the link between Power and Humility is Love.

And so I call us to worship with these words from First Corinthians, chapter 13:

“If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.

And if I have prophetic powers,  
and understand all mysteries and all knowledge,  
and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains,  
but do not have love, I am nothing.

If I give away all my possessions,  
and if I hand over my body so that I may boast,  
but do not have love, I gain nothing.

Love is patient; love is kind;  
love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude.  
It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth.  
It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends.”

Let us worship together.

**Reading: [To an army wife, in Sardis...] by Sappho**  
*translated by Mary Barnard*

To an army wife, in Sardis:

Some say a cavalry corps,  
some infantry, some, again,  
will maintain that the swift oars

of our fleet are the finest  
sight on dark earth; but I say  
that whatever one loves, is.

This is easily proved: did  
not Helen—she who had scanned  
the flower of the world's manhood—

choose as first among men one  
who laid Troy's honor in ruin?  
warped to his will, forgetting

love due her own blood, her own  
child, she wandered far with him.  
So Anactoria, although you

being far away forget us,

the dear sound of your footstep  
and light glancing in your eyes

would move me more than glitter  
of Lydian horse or armored  
tread of mainland infantry

### **Sermon: The Power of Love**

The finest sight on earth is whatever one loves.

We know Sappho only in part.

Sappho wrote love songs 2,600 years ago.

Time, weather, history, and the Church tried to destroy her writings, but love is patient, love is kind, it bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

And so her love songs prevailed.

But not perfectly: we are left with scraps of her writing, but they are filled with holes, big gaps, where words and notes used to be.

“The nothingness had once been full of music.”

In Melissa Broder’s book *The Pisces*, the narrator, a love-lorn Sappho scholar, reflects to a friend,

“I guess the gaps [in Sappho’s writing] are sort of a reminder that, in love, things get disconnected. People just disappear...”

Her friend replies, “Maybe they leave room for something more infinite.”

Love: fleeting and infinite,  
intangible and tangible,  
unrequited and unconditional.

Love is a holy ideal, a word Unitarian Universalists often use for God.

God is Love.

Is there any greater power than that?

Broder writes of Sappho, “her deepest desperation...or longing or eternal cosmic want was something to be celebrated—something natural—holy even, or at least, not just something to be endured.”

Her poetry, her songs of desire for women and men and for love itself, endured the centuries because love is eternal, and even in our hardest, most challenging times, we celebrate love as if our life depends on it...because it does.

Victoria Safford tells the story<sup>1</sup>  
of visiting an old cemetery and finding  
“a strangely soothing epitaph” on one of the gravestones.

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<sup>1</sup> *Walking Toward Morning*,

The name of the deceased and her dates  
had been scoured away by wind and rain,  
but there was a carving of a tree with roots and branches  
and among them the words,  
'She attended well and faithfully to a few worthy things.'

Stafford says, "At first this seemed... a little meager,  
a little stingy on the part of her survivors,  
but ...now I can't imagine a more proud or satisfying legacy.  
'She attended well and faithfully to a few worthy things.'"

"Every day," Stafford reflects, "I stand in danger  
of being struck by lightning and having the obituary in the local  
paper say,  
for all the world to see,  
'she attended frantically and ineffectually  
to a great many unimportant, meaningless details.'"

I share this because a few weeks ago I told you all that Attention  
is Love, and today I'm saying that God is Love.  
The ways we show love in the world is the work of God—  
however you understand God or whatever nickname you happen  
to have for all that is holy and good.  
In our faith tradition, we are co-creators with God: we are called  
to grow love, to bring justice, to show compassion.  
And we always need more role models in how to love.

So today I offer you two teachers of love, two people who attend well and faithfully to a few worthy things.

Our first teacher is Laura Calderwood.

Laura loves with a broken heart.

Laura's daughter Mollie Tibbetts was killed this past July.<sup>2</sup>

Mollie's killer was soon discovered to be a man named Christian Bahena Rivera, an undocumented immigrant.

There was a large community in their Iowan town of farmworkers, some of whom were undocumented.

As soon as Rivera's identity was released, our national news cycle began polarizing our country.

News trucks surrounded the farm where Bahena Rivera had worked.

The many workers there received a deluge of vitriol, anger, and threats.

There were racist telephone calls to farmworkers and their family members whose numbers had been listed—even minors.

Lots of hate mail.

A robo-call inciting violence went out to the whole town from a white supremacist group.

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<sup>2</sup> [https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/social-issues/trump-used-her-slain-daughter-to-rail-against-illegal-immigration-she-chose-a-different-path/2018/12/27/084f93a4-e9ce-11e8-a939-9469f1166f9d\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.cb24442bf9fb](https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/social-issues/trump-used-her-slain-daughter-to-rail-against-illegal-immigration-she-chose-a-different-path/2018/12/27/084f93a4-e9ce-11e8-a939-9469f1166f9d_story.html?utm_term=.cb24442bf9fb)

<https://psmag.com/news/the-martyring-of-mollie-tibbetts>

Even our own president, though he has never talked to Laura, used harsh words about her daughter's death to justify his brutal immigration policies.

The immigrant families who worked at the farm began to flee.

Ulises Felix came home to an empty house. His parents were leaving—immediately. Ulises was 17, about to be a high school senior, he didn't want to leave his home.

He texted his friend Scott that he didn't know what to do.

Scott was Mollie's brother.

Mollie's opinions about the world and politics and justice had not been secrets. Before her death, she had shared her thoughts about politics and morality on Twitter.

A Washington Post article said:

“Mollie had wanted to welcome all immigrants who needed help.

[Then] Scott came to Laura with an unusual request — could they take Ulises in?

...Laura thought of Mollie. She would argue that the farmworkers didn't deserve this, that they were only trying to earn a living.

What would she say about Ulises? Bring him in?

Laura ...worried about attracting unwanted attention, but again, what would Mollie say?”

Ulises lives with Scott and Laura now.

Over the first months of the school year, Ulises began to share with Laura how well he and his family had known Mollie's killer.

Bahena Rivera had come to the US alone. He sent his income back to Mexico to his parents. Ulises' parents had invited the young man to dinner with them most nights. Bahena Rivera had dated Ulises' cousin, and professed his love for her, and had a child with her, a daughter he might never see again as he sat behind bars, just as Laura would never see Mollie again.

"Justice to Laura had meant waking up every day knowing that Rivera was in pain. To hear something redeeming about him... made her feel uncomfortable and unmoored."

Others caught in the same circumstance, similarly grieving and unmoored, have chosen hatred.

"Laura feels anger...but not toward an entire group of people. She's not afraid of the demographic change remaking the country. But she does fear the deepening polarization. ... [S]he tries to live every day, including this one, just as she did before it all happened."

In that place of grief and discomfort is also compassion. Ulises and Laura and Scott live together, mourn their losses together, are caught in a national debate over immigration together. When Ulises hurt his ankle, Laura was the first one he texted. She makes his dinner and doctor's appointments. They are not

related, but they are family now. Their lives and losses and loves are real, not just political punching bags. They are living a confusing and heartbreaking story on a personal level. And this is all happening now.

Laura will grieve Mollie for the rest of her life.

She is living with a broken, open heart.

In the broken places, the gaps, in the empty spaces that can never be filled,

there lives something infinite, something patient, something kind.

Love never ends, and Laura is choosing love.

She attends well and faithfully to a few worthy things.

Our second teacher is Jeffrey Wright, who I learned about from a short documentary titled “Wright’s Law” reported on in the *Washington Post*.<sup>3</sup> Jeffrey Wright is a physics teacher in Louisville, Ky. He really knows how to keep students engaged in physics with his wacky experiments. One experiment involves an exploding pumpkin, another a ball of fire he holds in his hand. In one very remarkable scene lies on a bed of nails one with a cinder block on his chest. A student swings a

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<sup>3</sup> <https://well.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/12/24/laws-of-physics-cant-trump-the-bonds-of-love/>  
<https://www.globalonenessproject.org/library/films/wrights-law>

sledgehammer onto the block, shattering it! What a way to learn about force and energy!

Aside from Mr. Wright's wacky antics, it is the lecture he gives once a year that the students really remember.

The lecture is about his son, Adam, and what Adam has taught him about love.

Adam, now in his teens, has a rare genetic disorder called Joubert syndrome, in which the part of the brain related to balance and movement fails to develop properly. Adam breathes very rapidly, at least one breath per second, can't control his movements, and does not speak.

Mr. Wright said he decided to share his son's story when his physics lessons led students to start asking him "the big questions."

He said:

"When you start talking about physics, you start to wonder, 'What is the purpose of it all?'"

Kids started coming to me and asking me those ultimate questions. I wanted them to look at their life in a little different way—as opposed to just through the laws of physics—and give themselves more purpose in life."

Mr. Wright starts his lecture by talking about the hopes and dreams he had for Adam and his older daughter, Abbie. He

recalls the day Adam was born, and the sadness he felt when he learned of his condition.

He tells his students:

“All those dreams about ever watching my son knock a home run over the fence went away. The whole thing about where the universe came from? I didn’t care. ... I started asking myself, what was the point of it?”

All that changed one day when Mr. Wright saw Abbie, about 4 at the time, playing with dolls on the floor next to baby Adam.

...He realized that his son could see and play—he had an inner life. He and his wife, Nancy, began teaching Adam simple sign language.

One day, his son signed “I love you.”

In the lecture, Mr. Wright signs it for the class:

“Daddy, I love you.”

He tells his class it was the most incredible thing he had ever seen. And he goes on, ever the teacher:

“There is something a lot greater than energy.  
There’s something a lot greater than entropy.  
What’s the greatest thing?”

“Love,” his students whisper.

“That’s what makes the ‘why’ we exist,”  
Mr. Wright tells the spellbound students.  
“In this great big universe, we have all those stars.  
Who cares? Well, somebody cares.  
Somebody cares about you a lot.  
As long as we care about each other,  
that’s where we go from here.”

When I watched the documentary, the students were crying, and so was I. In an interview about the film, Mr. Wright says,

“When you look at physics, it’s all about laws and how the world works. But if you don’t tie those laws into a much bigger purpose, the purpose in your heart, then they are going to sit there and ask the question ‘Who cares?’  
“Kids are very spiritual — they want a bigger purpose. I think that’s where this story gives them something to think about.”

‘He attended well and faithfully to a few worthy things.’  
Adam can’t speak.  
The place where his words would be is all gaps, all empty spaces.  
And his family fills them with the infinite, the unconditional, the music of love.

“Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way...Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends.”

What are a few worthy things in your life,  
To which you attend well and faithfully?

I told you that Attention is Love.  
I told you that God is Love.  
But that's not quite right.  
No, we must do as my friend Gary Smith says,  
“Read it backwards....Love is God.”

Our words and our actions are God's love in the broken places,  
Filling the empty spaces  
Turning nothingness into music  
Making room for the infinite.  
May your heart be broken open.  
May you turn your attention toward the finest sight on earth,  
The few things you hold truly worthy,  
And may you love them well and faithfully.  
*Amen.*