

The Victory of Love
Sermon by the Rev. Sarah C. Stewart
Delivered September 27, 2015 at First Unitarian Church

My friend Rachel was easy to love. She was intelligent and funny, curious and brave. She kept up with hundreds of friends from all stages of her life. She collected friends, pulling people along with her boundless energy and interest in the world. I met Rachel in middle school and she was one of my best friends from then on, until her death in a [train accident last spring](#).

As a young adult Rachel lived in Guatemala, Nepal and Kyrgyzstan, and had friends from those sojourns. She kept in touch with the family she had lived with in Nepal, where she first began to learn about small business in the developing world; and she kept up business contacts among a Ukrainian community of Jewish women, hoping to sell their textiles in America. She had friends from college and business school, from her temple and from her neighborhood in Manhattan, from the camp she attended as a teenager and from the small city in Michigan where we grew up. She left behind hundreds of people who adored her, not least her husband and young son. She would have been forty next month. She was so easy to love.

When I think of Rachel and her untimely death, the thing that bothers me the most is how scared she must have been when her Amtrak commuter train derailed. The train sped up going around a curve in Philadelphia and a minute later went off the tracks. I imagine she had a moment to know something was wrong and then I imagine the panic, the noise, the pain she might have felt. I hope she did not suffer. I hope that in those last moments, with terror around her, she felt held and surrounded by all the love she had in her life. We all must die, in the end, some of us in our peaceful bed at the end of a long life, and some of us suddenly and much too young. For all of us, when we go, it is love that will carry us over the threshold and love that will keep our despair at bay. It is love that will comfort those we leave behind, and the love we have grown that will be our only legacy when we are gone.

How many of you, when I say this, think lovingly of the person sitting next to you in the pew, or your children (downstairs or living adult lives), or your best friend? How many of you think of someone who is easy to love? For these people, it is not hard for us to imagine a point of view from which love is the source and goal of human existence. It is not hard for us to look at the world and see first, in the foreground, our own loving relationships and feel the ways our own hearts break at injustice and loss. In these feelings of openness and compassion, we feel a connection to a loving Source. We feel plugged in to the Big Love—some might say Divine Love—and we know it as an example and wellspring for our own feelings toward one another.

That's good. Those feelings help us. They help us get through hard times. They help us experience empathy and compassion toward those who are different from us. I think about Rachel's little son, who will not remember his mother, and I wish for him a world filled with the kind of love his mother left behind, a world that will surround him with good people and opportunities for kindness and help his heart grow strong. I let my imagination extrapolate out and I can imagine an immense source of love that feels toward all of us as I feel toward that little boy: immense tenderness and a desire to see love grow. Even in the hard places of the world, I can imagine that power and love hang together and hope that we, in all our failings, grow ever in that direction.

But we know that those hard places of the world are very hard, indeed. We know the hard places of our hearts are brittle and unyielding. We know all too well that we do not always love, and that anger and hatred and retribution are just as human as empathy and compassion. I love Rachel, but what about the driver of that train? What about an army commander in Syria? What about those in our own lives who have hurt us? If we are called to love, how do we love those whom it is easier to hate?

One of the gifts Rachel gave me, as did others, was an appreciation and love for the Jewish faith, which was her home. I attended my first seder with her family and I still have the party favors from her bat mitzvah. This week, the Jewish community observed the fast of [Yom Kippur](#), one of the holiest days in the year. One of the themes of Yom Kippur is the theme of repentance. To prepare for the fast and the

sealing of the Book of Life on Yom Kippur itself, faithful Jews search their hearts and seek forgiveness for wrongs they might have committed in the previous year. Wrongs against God go to God in prayer, but wrongs against people must go to the people wronged, to actually talk through what happened, apologize, and ask forgiveness. The morning scripture at the synagogue on Yom Kippur treats this theme. It tells the story of how the ancient Israelites dealt with their wrongs and sins before each other and before God. The story, from the Torah book of Leviticus, involves two goats.

Two goats were brought to the holy tent. Standing outside the tent, the priest cast lots over the goats. One became a sacrifice to God, ritually offered inside the holy tent. But the priest laid his hands on the head of the other goat, and spoke over it the sins of the community. He took that goat inside the tent and presented it to God alive, with the people's sins on its head; and then the goat—the scapegoat—was sent away from the people into the wilderness, taking their sins with it.

The word for “wilderness” is interesting. In Hebrew it is the word “Azazel,” which is hard to translate. Early Jewish translators thought it meant “to be sent away”; it was the goat sent away, which is also where we get the English word “scapegoat,” the “goat who escapes.” Early Rabbinic Judaism identified Azazel with a demon who lived in the wilderness and could be counted on to eat the goat, and by extension the people's sins. Some scholars have argued that the original Hebrew word meant “for the elimination of God's wrath (Grabbe 101).” The goat with the sins of the people on its head was exiled. It was sent to be eaten by the demon of the wilderness. It was sent for the elimination of God's wrath, which would otherwise surely have visited itself upon the people.

A modern Jewish writer remembers that in her childhood her family recited their wrongdoings onto a chicken, to ward off evil. Contemporary Jews, she writes, are more likely to donate money to charity (Klagsbrun 37). The focus of Yom Kippur is more forgiveness now than goats and demons. But all of us, of all religious heritage, still look for that being on whom we can heap our sins and exile from the community forever. We still look for a way to divide the world up into those who can be loved and those who cannot, those who can stay in the community and those who must go into the wilderness. In fact, we are just as likely to decide that being is not a goat or a chicken but a person who must be punished to help keep the community safe.

The week last May when Rachel died was the same week that [Dzhokar Tsarnaev](#), the Boston Marathon bomber, was condemned to death. If you have experienced a terrible loss that was in the news, you will know that I became unable to listen to the news during the weeks after Rachel's death. I couldn't listen to stories about the Amtrak derailment, or read them online. I would try to sneak in other news and be ready to turn the radio off at a moment's notice.

When Tsarnaev was condemned, I discovered something strange. The reactions of Bostonians who took a fierce delight in his death sentence evoked the same response in me. My tears would well up and I had to turn off the radio. Why? Why were these reactions so close to each other? Not only did I not know Tsarnaev, I was in Boston during the terrible manhunt for him and his brother in 2013. I remember the eerie silence, and the fear, and the whole city in mourning for the innocent victims of his terrible act. But there I was, crying over the news, feeling the loss of my friend every time I was reminded of Tsarnaev's death penalty. It was salt in the wound of my heart.

I've had some time to reflect on that response and I think I know what was happening. I think I was reacting to the loss of love in the world. Rachel was easy to love, and Tsarnaev is easy to hate. He is too easy to hate, and if we let ourselves hate him and kill him and cut him off from the possibility of that Big Love reaching him then we have reduced the potential for love in the world. We have said, “This man, this one man who did such terrible things, he must be sent to the wilderness; he must be cut off forever from the community and its relationship to the divine.” We have said that our capacity to love and forgive shall be the final capacity, that we are willing to set limits on forgiveness and grace because we ourselves have limited and shuttered hearts.

It is not fair that someone like Rachel should be dead and someone like Tsarnaev should be alive; but I give thanks for my faith that something moves in the universe beyond my sense of what is fair and just. I

give thanks for the example of a loving Source, even if it is only a faithful idea, because a universal Love pulls me along and makes me a better person. It magnifies my own heart and enlivens my soul and helps me love more in myself and others, even those parts and those people who are hard to love.

I do not want to be reduced to my own basest instincts and my own vindictiveness. I do not want anyone to be cut off from the power of holy forgiveness. I want to imagine that Tsarnaev, when his time comes to die, feels around him that same source of Love that I imagine Rachel felt at the end. It may all be only imagination, but so is the notion that evil can be undone through ritual or that the death penalty pays for the crimes someone committed. Give me the choice of the God I will imagine, the God to whom I will give my heart, and I will choose the God of love.

It is intolerable that the people we love die. We go on loving them after they are gone; we go on mourning them and trying to make sense of the hole they have left in our world. It is intolerable that there is violence in the world, that there are bombers and militiamen and unsafe train tracks. But if we think that a divine power is responsible for all that wrath, the rituals we must undertake to protect ourselves from God will be never-ending.

We live in a chaotic and violent world, a world with people who do terrible things. But thank goodness we can choose to imagine a source of Love that holds us and fills us up with loving-kindness toward one another. Thank goodness we are given the power to stretch out our hearts to hold another, and to love them, even though that love will someday end in loss. Thank goodness we are given eyes to see beauty, and minds to hold wonder, and hearts to feel compassion. Thank the God who is Love that we are not limited by what is intolerable but inspired by what is possible, that someday everyone may live in peace and every person may be easy to love.

Please join me in the spirit of prayer.

O Source of Peace and Love, hold us in this tender time of the turning of the year. Lead us to peace: to a deep peace in our hearts, and peace in our homes, and peace in our communities, and everlasting peace in the time to come. Lead us to compassion and mercy. Help us to see these virtues in others and take them as examples in our own lives.

Give us the humility to know when we are wrong and to ask forgiveness of those we have harmed. Give us the grace to grant forgiveness to those who have harmed us. Give us time for the sacred, for the ultimate Presence or the silence of the meditative hour, to lift up and let go all we cannot mend.

May our actions serve to inscribe our names on the Book of Life. May our lives be a mitzvah, and when our time comes to die, may our memories be as a blessing to all who knew us. Amen.



Sources

(c) Sarah C. Stewart. First preached at the First Unitarian Church in the Second Parish of Worcester on Sunday, September 27, 2015.

Grabbe, Lester L. "Leviticus." *The Oxford Bible Commentary*. Ed. John Barton and John Muddiman. New York: Oxford UP, 2001. 91-110.

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