“Love is a teacher”
Preaching and Pastoring Within the Climate Catastrophe
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“Love all God’s creation, the whole and every grain of sand of it. Love every leaf . . . love the animals, love the plants, love everything . . . [Siblings], love is a teacher; but one must know how to acquire it, for it is hard to acquire, it is dearly bought, it is won slowly by long labor. For we must love not only occasionally, for a moment, but forever.” – Father Zossima, in The Brothers Karamazov, *Fyodor Dostoyevsky.*

To begin, I ask you to hold in your heart the people who have called us to preach and pastor among them. We, called to this task and this life, have been called by both the holy and by some set of people. A congregation, a community, a set of clients or others we serve have asked us to love them, to live by example, and to preach the truth in the spirit of love alongside them.

See them. Hear their voices. Witness their tears. Feel them shake with rage and fear. Watch them laugh, talk, and wonder – “what are we to do, pastor?”

I name some of mine, to invoke them. A sentence or two about their story.

Allen is our grounds guy. He leads the electric car club in town. He loves nuclear power and sends me articles sometimes about the potential for fusion. He’s got no problem with solar or wind, but nuclear is where it’s at. He loves the church and its people but wishes more folks would show up on the grounds clean up day.

Stanley is a friend of the church, not a member – he’s the should-have-retired-two-years ago leader of an interfaith justice organization. He tries to connect some ecological activists, but he mostly only knows boomers. He got his start as an anti-war Vietnam veteran and then as the leader of the community effort to stop the building of a nuclear plant a few miles downriver from Rockford.

Stanley and Allen are friends regardless of their deep disagreement about nuclear power.

Bob is a long-time UU who is new to our church and took over the green sanctuary team for a while, until I had to take it away from him. His heart aches at ecological injustice, and every other form of injustice, though he doesn’t see how his generational and gendered approach

turns off women, trans people, and anyone under 70 from the work. He started a campaign to get local restaurants to use non-plastic to-go containers, but nobody really joined on.

Sara is a young single mom, and the lead union organizer for Rockford. She came to church more often before the pandemic. She represents public employees and union laborers and helped to make sure that Illinois passed a clean energy bill that kept the nuclear plant open and required prevailing wage on energy projects.

Rebecca is a mom of two kids under 3 who has joined the new ecojustice team. When she talks about the future for her kids, she weeps. She says "I need to do something. I can't say to them, I didn't even try."

Andrew is a farmer outside of town. They grow corn and soy and harvest animals. He asked me for a copy of the land acknowledgment we do, because his local farmer's cooperative has started doing one and it's not as good. He asked once, "should I be giving my land back to someone? Help me understand what to do." He's proud of his work to push other farmers to be more sustainable. He is the father of three young girls, and is a big, caring man with a giant laugh.

Steve is the chair of the Northwest Rivers Sierra Club chapter. He used to teach RE at church, but his kids grew up. A former peace corps volunteer, he's been to more than 100 countries around the world. He makes presentations around the community for the Clean Energy law, solar panels, and wilderness preservation. You can find him most afternoons at the pub enjoying his friends and good beer.

Allyson is a queer nonbinary urban farmer. They and their wife sell their produce on a free-will basis. The mushroom sales and the compost service make some money, but not enough. They're working on supporting mutual aid societies but understand those as BIPOC spaces that are not for them to lead. We've started paying them as our lead youth advisor, and I want to give them more funds in a way that feels right. Sometimes Allyson and I feel like we're speaking a language a lot of the others don't understand. Allyson sets up a farm stand on Sunday outside of church, and the produce is beautiful.

These are some of my people. Did you think of yours? Do so now.

Would you like to name them, just their first name, into this space?

There are others for me. My window looks out on the forest, and the baby deer, the foxes and coyotes, the cardinals and turkeys, all come to visit. The prairie turns into a sunset of grasses. The weather rolls in over the landscape. They call us too. And are part of who we serve.

These folks are grappling with what to do. They feel a need to act, often – to do something, so that they can look their children in the eye and not be ashamed. They need a way to hold off their despair, to channel their anger, and turn their tears into action. And they come to us hoping we can help.

But before there can be hope or solace, there must be solastalgia. We, and so many of our relations, are experiencing this heartbreak feeling, "the existential and lived experience of negative environmental change, manifest as an attack on one's sense of place."[1] It is not hard to feel in our body and bones a sense of wrongness at droughts and floods, fiery forests, plowed prairies, smog, and dislocated species. We and our relations feel ecoanxiety, ecophobia, tierratrauma, and the other emotions that Albrecht names. We cannot easily distinguish between these various feelings; they rumble and roll over us. We and our people bounce from sorrow to denial, rage to shame, and everything in between.

Before we reimagine a new social order, make plans for mutual aid and resistance and resilience, or even see what we can do to reduce our energy use, we must approach these feelings – as signals and signposts of the deep-heart work, and reminders that we are part of the web of life and not, contrary to ideologies of separation and domination, above or apart. These feelings tell us a truth we should hear.

We know about grief.

When I lead a memorial service, I often use these words from Khalil Gibran, perhaps you do too: "When you are sorrowful, look again in your heart and you will see that in truth you are weeping for that which has been your delight." Solastalgia and biophilia are interwoven feelings, and our grief for what is lost, or might be lost, is a sign of our love.

We can create and lead rituals, for worship or other times, that honor both our grief and our love. Through ritual, grief can become manageable – and thus action possible. Here is one for us, tonight.

Take please, into your hands, the leaf in front of you. Notice the veins in the leaf, not so different from our own. This is the leaf's natural color, by the way; during the summer the

[1] Albrecht, 38.

chlorophyll makes it green – but leaves are normally this way. Leaves take energy to grow, and then they give that energy back to the tree, for the tree to grow, then they fall to the earth and return to the soil – though it takes a long time. "Put your faith in the two inches of humus that will build under the trees every thousand years."[2] Yet, in their changing and falling, we feel the sorrow of something ending.

When ending and beginning, soil and sun, growing and falling, is roughly in balance we can accept, even rejoice, in the cycle of life. But we know that these things are not in balance. We know that forests full of trees, natural places that absorb carbon dioxide, are burned to make grazing land for beef cattle; not just releasing into the air all the carbon they have stored but causing pain and suffering.

We feel this loss, we feel the fear of rising seas, the end of ice. Breathe. It's okay to feel sad, to feel hurt, these are signs of love.

Join me in a prayer of lament.

Goddess of leaves and soil, spirit of water and fire and air,
power that connects us to all that was, is and will be,
we come with sorrow and with grief.
Our hearts break for the damage done,
the lives of plants and animals and fungi that are already lost,
and those whose future is bleak,
we weep in sorrow for these loses.
We confess that we are caught in networks and webs of hurt and exploitation.
We have tried to do what we can,
and we know it is not enough.
We confess our sin of so-called independence,
and plea for you to turn our heart to intradependence,
to remind us that we are more than connected,
we are one ecological system with all that is.
We know that you mourn with us,
and rage with us,
we know that your love is larger than our sins,
yet we weep
at the loss of our homeland,
and we know you weep along with all of life.

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[2] Wendell Berry, "Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front."

Goddess and God and Spirit of all, join our lament and our confession.
Amen.

Singing:
By the waters, the waters of Babylon
we sat down and wept, and wept for thee, Zion.
We remember, we remember, we remember thee, Zion.

We remember and we weep – solastalgia. Our bodies, our hearts remember and they long. Don't turn away. Feel that grief and know that it is love. It is love for your home, for other living things, for beauty and wonder and life itself. It is love you are feeling.

If you are comfortable, close your eyes. Keep hold of the leaf. I want you to picture a place, a place that feels like home, perhaps, or that feels alive and loving to you. Maybe it is this place, the waters, the hill, the trees. Maybe it is a small park in the city or sitting next to a plant, or an animal, in your house. A childhood forest remembered, or a beach of stones and sand. See it.

Hear it.
Smell the place.
Touch something there, in your mind's eye, and with your other hand,
place that hand on your heart,
and know that it is love between you, the earth,
and that lovers of life are not alone.

Feel that leaf in your hands.
Love every leaf.
Know this:
the earth loves you back.
The earth loves you back.

It is the sweetgrass that is harvested, just the right amount,
that grows strong and think.
The bees feed and make the flowers come alive with beauty.
The water flows down in streams of love.
We are woven into all of life.
It is love that we feel, in our grief and in our hope,
look inside your heart and you will see that in truth
it is love.

It is love that calls us forward.
We are called to rise up,
to gather with lovers of life,
to say, to sing, the land is holy and so are we.

Singing:
The tide is rising and so are we. (x3)
This is where we are called to be! (x2)
The land is holy and so are we (x3)
This is where we are called to be! (x2)[3]

Gods of many names, goddesses of leaves and trees and waters,
of those who love life,
we know that you are love,
and call us to love,
to weep in our sorrow
and rise from bended knee to love this world
with our whole body,
our fingers and toes,
our ears and eyes,
our hearts and minds.
Give us courage and hold us in your endless love
this day and every day.
Amen.

You can put your leaf down if you wish –
later, you can, or I will, return it to the soil where it can return to the earth.

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The feeling of restlessness, of homelessness, is a common existential experience. Those who have lived in times of empire, transition, migration, or transformation often feel that they are "out of place" or "out of time." We have not always named these existential feelings as ecological, but historians are now naming the ecological factors which have often driven world events. For example, the collapse of the western Roman Empire was accelerated by the Plague of Cyprian (249-262 AD), which caused mass death, leading to a shortage both of soldiers and

[3] Rabbi Shoshona Meira Friedman and Yotam Schachter, 2015

farmers.[4] This plague, though sometimes thought to be a zoonotic influenza, is often presumed to be a kind of hemorrhagic fever, like Ebola. The empire's global trade routes, crowded port cities, and move toward large estate farms with common worker/slave quarters (instead of small farms owned and operated by citizens), along with weather pattern shifts in North Africa, where Rome got its grain, made this plague a horrific and wide-ranging catastrophe.

The Cyprian plague was named for the bishop of Carthage, who identified its symptoms. Some 120 years later a former grammar teacher from that city would write of God, "Our hearts are restless until we find rest in you."[5] Augustine's answer to collapsing empire was to claim that our home was not in the empire, or even in the world, but in the heart of God.

There is, though, another choice. Later papers will address, I assume, whether the climate crisis requires any future theism to be panentheistic to be credible; since my inconsistent theism is always only panentheistic I can simply affirm that we can indeed find rest in the world.

> *When despair for the world grows in me*
> *and I wake in the night at the least sound*
> *in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be,*
> *I go and lie down where the wood drake*
> *rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.*
> *I come into the peace of wild things*
> *who do not tax their lives with forethought*
> *of grief. I come into the presence of still water.*
> *And I feel above me the day-blind stars*
> *waiting with their light. For a time*
> *I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.*[6]

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[4] Other examples include the drought and famine (while droughts are often natural, famines are always "man-made") that preceded both the French and Russian revolutions (listen to the podcast "Revolutions" by Mike Duncan for more). Or take the bubonic plague which ravaged the Byzantine Empire, caused by overcrowding and poverty in their port cities.

[5] Augustine, *Confessions,* 1.

[6] Wendell Berry, from *New Collected Poems.*
I cannot but help also quote the last lines of Brother Neely's marvelous "A Farmer Feeds," addressed to Augustine:
"Won't you speak gently to yourself,
caring less about the joy of sinning slightly
and more about the joy of living fully,

and find in the pilfered pear,
not depravity, but hunger,
a hunger only sated by the grace of this world?"

Look inside your heart, and you will know what you love. What would it mean for us, as pastors and preachers, to respond to the sorrow, rage, and longing of our people, and of ourselves, through these concepts of restlessness, home, and love? We can suggest that the reason we feel grief is not simply a utilitarian accounting of the lives and species lost but a true sense that part of ourselves is hurting. We can say that we will be restless until we find rest in the grace of the world; and that such rest, now, cannot be had unless it is accompanied by action.

Only grounded in love will action have power and fortitude. "Anger may be a catalyst for action, but connecting with what I love is a better guide than anger will ever be for deciding which actions to take."[7]

To make, motivate and sustain the world we must live into, it is love that must ground us. Jay O'Hara, the Quaker activist who, with Ken Ward, sailed *The Henry David T.,* a modified lobster boat, to block the path of *The Energy Enterprise,* put it this way, in his conversation with Wen Stephenson:

> *I [Wen] asked Jay if he was still working for social change, in the conventional sense, building a social and political movement.*
> *"I don't think that gets deep enough for what I'm after," [Jay] said . . . "I believe it's time for a new world—for the revealing of a new way of being in the world, of our relation to the earth and to one another."*
> *What's going to unleash those powerful forces?*
> *"Love."*
> *And what's going to unleash the love? A movement? Climate chaos itself?*
> *"I don't know," Jay said. . . . "The love and commitment of communities of resistance, who are prophetic in their relationship to the existing world, who live into that world as faithfully as they can, not knowing where they're going to end up, but knowing that the root is love—that's the only force powerful enough to confront what we have to confront."*[8]

But it is not just that this love is necessary for the change we need. This love is also true. It is grounded in truths about the nature of life itself.

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[7] Rabbi Mordechai Liebling, *Rooted and Rising,* 7.

[8] Stephenson, *What we are Fighting For Now is Each Other,* 137.

We know from ecological, evolutionary, cosmic, neurobiological, and quantum science that life really is deeply interconnected. Certain Buddhist and other mystical insights that the boundaries between forms of life are illusions turn out to be proven true by insights in quantum realities. Whitehead and Hartshorne's suggestions about panpsychism may not be as outlandish as Descartes imagined. Sallie McFauge notes that "relationality is more basic than existence: 'I relate; therefore I am.'"[9] She refers not to interdependence but intradependence, arguing that "faith is the willingness to lead a totally intradependent, receiving life from God and others, as well as passing that life along."[10] If we turn our search for a home for our restlessness toward a flowing, mutual, life with all of life, of which we are just one part, we may answer the pastoral need for home as well as motivate a sustained change in how that living together happens.

This "love of living together" is what we are sometimes afraid to long for. Yet this desire, what Albrecht calls "sumbiophilia"[11] – has the potential to "prevail over eco-necrophilia and possible ecocide. At the global scale, 'tierraphilia,' or the love of the Earth, is a logical extension of sumbiophilia."[12] From these feelings – the love of living together and the love the Earth, alongside love for particular places (those places I asked you to imagine earlier) – Albrecht argues that "soliphilia," the love for the totality of our place relationships, is the remedy for solastalgia and "global dread."[13] This love is not abstract but concrete. Philia, the Greek work used in this neologism, indicates the friendship form of love; and we are invited to love the places of the world as we might love our friends, say, for example, those around these tables. It is not a desire to possess, surrender, or set free, but a longing for mutual flourishing.

The danger with this pastoral and prophetic approach, especially for some of our people (and some of us) whose sense of self-sufficiency is unduly elevated, is to focus only on how we might love the world, our places, and each other. But a relationship of friendship runs not in only one direction. We must add to our approach what may be hard for some of us to hear: you are loved too.

The earth loves you back. The Holy loves you back. God loves you back.

Albrecht turns to the study of the community of bees undertaken by Rudolf Steiner, who noted that "that which we experience within ourselves only at a time when our hearts develop love is

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[9] McFauge, *A New Climate for Christology,* xi.

[10] McFauge, xi.

[11] Albrecht, 119.

[12] ibid, 120.

[13] ibid, 121.

actually the very same thing that is present as a substance in the entire beehive. The beehive is permeated with life based on love."[14] Albrecht connects this understanding with the wisdom expressed in Aboriginal consciousness, including The Dreaming, "a form of symbiotic spirituality"; where "you do not need to see everything to know that all is interconnected."[15]

And yet, the more we see, the more it turns out that this is true. The science, over and over again, indicates that there is a mutual desire for flourishing embedded into the structure of life itself. And what is this but love and friendship?

> *Maybe it was the smell of ripe tomatoes, or the oriole singing, or that certain slat of light on a yellow afternoon and the beans hanging think around me. It just came to me in a wash of happiness that made me laugh out loud, startling the chickadees who were picking at the sunflowers, raining black and white hulls on the ground. I knew it with a certainty as warm and clear as the September sunshine. The land loves us back. She loves us with beans and tomatoes, with roasting ears and blackberries and birdsongs.*[16]

Over and over again, Kimmerer indicates the friendship relationships between various species and systems, including the human ones. The gentle harvest of sweetgrass, maple syrup, leeks, and animals, done in wise proportions and at the right season, helps all species to thrive – including humans. To live in this kind of harmony is to both build and feel the loving heart of the symbiocence.

Attending to the continued wisdom of Indigenous traditions has many advantages if done with maturity and respect, *and* we do not *need* to look outside of the western religious traditions to find these understandings of how love does and should characterize the relationship between human life and all other life and the earth itself. When preaching and pastoring to and with our people, we can lift up a whole host of ideas from the west. That includes, of course, the Transcendentalist nature traditions; they have their complications (as these all do), yet can speak to our people of a search for a biophilic way of living.

It also includes the 20th and 21st century panentheistic mysticism of Christian, Jewish, and many other traditions. Matthew Fox, Sallie McFague, Charles Hartshorne, Ursula Goodenough, Loren Eiseley, and Pierre Teilhard De Chardin, among many others, would all be included in this story. Teilhard's doctrine of the incarnation, for example, would be well suited to a UU Christmas Eve

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[14] Albrecht, 144.

[15] ibid, 145.

[16] Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass,* 122.

service. As Newell summarizes it, "Instead of allowing [the fact that God was born in the flesh] to point to the oneness of heaven and earth, the union of spirit and matter in all things, the marriage of the divine and the human in all people, the church has said that it is a truth that applies only to one, namely, Jesus, and that this one is an exception to humanity rather than a revelation of the deepest truth of humanity. [Which is this:] The Light of the sacred is deep in all things. We will be well to the extent that we are one with this Light in one another in the earth."[17]

Every night a child is born is a sacred night.

What we are asking ourselves and our people, the fearful and disillusioned, the active and the frantic, the numb and the distracted, the weeping and the striving, is to turn toward love, the earth, and each other instead of to turn away. To turn towards the sacred that lives in them, and in and between all life and, if Teilhard and Hartshorne are right, in all matter.

How do we preach and pastor in the climate of this catastrophe? We remind them (us) that we weep for that which we love, and that the earth loves us back.

We will be restless until our hearts find their way home, to the grace of the world. In this, we turn away from the Empire-grieving theology of Augustine, and toward the theologies of the monk he made a heretic, Pelagius. A century after that Cyprian plague, Pelagius too articulated a theory of grace, and how we could find our way home. He held a rich and wide doctrine of incarnation as well, "teaching that what is deepest in us is *of* God, not *opposed* to God. It is this, he said, that we can clearly see in the face of a newborn child."[18] This grace of God's inner presence is not just in human life, but in all life. "God's spirit is in all living things . . . 'and if we look with God's eyes, nothing on the earth is ugly."[19] We are called, and we invite others, to look with these sacred eyes, to hear with these sacred ears, to touch with these grace-filled fingers, to taste and smell with deep love. "O taste and see that the Lord is good."[20]

In the face of despair and sorrow, to turn to the love which is underneath these feelings is no simple task. We may be tempted to say that humans are inherently sinful in this regard, that we cannot be redeemed, and that we are a kind of invasive species. Without love, these noisy gongs may ring true. But the evidence suggests that when a loving friendship between us and

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[17] John Phillip Newell, *Sacred Earth, Sacred Soul,* 176.

[18] Newell, 32.

[19] ibid., 35.

[20] Psalm 34:8

the earth is present, we can restore, sustain, and help natural environments (which includes humans) thrive. As Kimmerer puts it, "predictions for sweetgrass were consistent with their Western science worldview, which sets human beings outside of 'nature' and judges their interactions with other species as largely negative. They had been schooled that the best way to protect a dwindling species was to leave it alone and keep people away. But the grassy meadows tell us that for sweetgrass, human beings are part of the system, a vital part."[21] When we love the earth, the earth loves us back.

"Ceremony focuses attention so that attention becomes intention."[22] In ritual, in pastoral conversations, in worship, we can seek to turn our attention to the grace of relationship. Relationship is how we exist. The symbiotic relationship of all things is what we seek. We are part, not apart, from this relationship. It is love we feel when we weep and when we shake with rage.

When our people seek solutions (even when they disagree about them), they express their love – sometimes clumsily, and in need of grounding and depth. When our people worry for their children, cook food from their garden, rush through the drive-through in their busy day, notice the changing leaves outside for a moment, and go about their hours and years, they are touching the wide grace of the world. Ceremony which draws their attention to these longings, which names them and honors them, can remind us that we what we feel and what we seek is not tangential to our existence, but central.

We seek and long for our home. Where we are no longer restless. Where the seasons of the year, the beauty of each other (all others), and coming and going is in balance.

It is for us to do, and for us who need, to make ceremony, to use image and word, to point to these deeper dimensions. To say clearly that we weep for what we love, and that the earth loves us back. To move toward love.

> *They come now every day to check, go down to the shore and gaze out to sea. And still the salmon do not come. So the waiting scientists roll out their sleeping bags and turn off the lab equipment. All but one. A single microscope light is left on.*

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[21] Kimmerer, 163.

[22] ibid., 249.

> *Out beyond the surf they gather, tasting the waters of home. They see it against the dark of the headland. Someone has left a light on, blazing a tiny beacon into the night, calling the salmon back home.*[23]

Since 2013, when Kimmerer published *Braiding Sweetgrass*, the wild Coho Salmon population has finally returned to the Cascade Head estuary and the Salmon River. The ending of a hatchery program in 2008, whose returning adults had crowded out the wild population, combined with the maturity and fidelity (the love, we can say) of the restoration effort, finally brought the Salmon home.[24]

Will you pick up your leaf and hear these words from Margaret Bullitt-Jonas?

> *Standing among logs and stumps that just hours ago were a living forest, I pick up a beech tree leaf. I cradle it in my palm, marveling at its veins and stem, color and shape. A message resounds in this leaf:* Here is the world in its beauty. *A second message comes:* Here is the world in its fragility. *I cup my hand gently around the leaf as I hear its final message, an urgent appeal:* Here is the world in its need and longing to be healed. *I hear in the leaf the same supplication that sings in my own deep core:* Choose life![25]

It is all so precarious. There is reason to weep and worry. But all is not lost. Our tears are signs of love, and it is love that is true. It is not too late to find the way home. May we help to light the way home, and may we follow that light back to where we belong. May we choose life.

Love every leaf, every living thing, all of life, including yourself. And remember that the earth loves you back.

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[23] Kimmerer, 253.

[24] See https://nativefishsociety.org/news-media/wild-abundance-vs-hatchery-drain-pt-1-hatchery-effects-1.

[25] Margaret Bullitt-Jonas, *Rooted and Rising,* 177-178.