

Love Groups vs. Hate Groups, Part II

Rev. Thomas Cary Kinder

United Church of Strafford, Vermont

May 9, 2021 Sixth Sunday of Easter

Selected verses from Psalm 22:26-31; John 15:11-13; Luke 10:25-37

Call to Worship: Welcome to the United Church of Strafford, Vermont, on this Sixth Sunday of Easter. The Easter season celebrates the triumph of light and life over darkness and death. It proclaims a love powerful enough to overcome fear and greed and hate.

We need to remember how Easter's power has transformed the past. It is not a uniquely Christian power, it is a universal power that Christ embodied. It is the power that brought earth back from five major extinctions. It is the power every person feels who has been deathly ill and recovers. It is the power of resilient love that rises again from losses or wounds.

The Dalai Lama, Greta Thunberg, Valerie Kaur and William Barber have shown this power in their lives. Yitzhak Rabin was Prime Minister of Israel, a man of war who brutally attacked Palestinians, but when he saw that the result was an endless cycle of worsening violence he changed course and risked everything for the sake of peace, winning the Nobel Prize. He was gunned down by a rightwing fundamentalist filled with ethnic hate.

But remember

[writes Wendell Berry in a poem written on the day of Rabin's burial]

when a man of war becomes a man of peace,

he gives a light, divine

though it is also human.

When a man of peace is killed

by a man of war, he gives a light.

You do not have to walk in darkness.

If you will have the courage for love,

you may walk in light. It will be

the light of those who have suffered

for peace. It will be

your light.

Let us worship together in the light of Easter life and love... *[the sermon begins below]*

Love Groups vs. Hate Groups, Part II

Julia Ward Howe was the poet and abolitionist who wrote the “Battle Hymn of the Republic.” She proposed a “Mother’s Day for Peace” to demonstrate the oneness of women of all nations whose love united would abolish war.

I could use this day to pay tribute to the nurturing care of mothers, I could point out how strong the tender mothering Spirit was in Jesus, but the mothering of Julia Ward Howe is calling to me.

It lives today in Valerie Kaur who writes about oneness and an end to violence in her book *See No Stranger: A Memoir and Manifesto of Revolutionary Love*.

She writes, “Neurobiologists call oxytocin the love hormone. The more oxytocin in the body, the more care and nurturing mammals show for their babies. Oxytocin decreases aggression in a mother’s body overall with one exception—in defense of her young. When babies are threatened, oxytocin actually increases aggression. For mothers, rage is part of love: It is the biological force that protects that which is loved.”

Valerie Kaur points out that grief is also part of mothering, and is the price of love.

This is the second sermon I am preaching on “Love Groups vs. Hate Groups,” and in that context we experience both grief and Mama Bear rage.

Mothering love has moved our congregation to fight for the health of the earth and fight against racism, to protect what we love. It has moved us to care for local people in need and to support refugees, the hungry, people storm tossed or war torn around the world.

Churches like ours are love groups, but the most virulent, violent hate in our nation is also coming out of churches in the form of white supremacist Christian nationalists. They commit murders, they are organizing for civil war, they are attacking democracy on many fronts including laws taking away the voting rights of people they hate. Their hate groups are rapidly gaining strength and could well return an anti-democratic, racist, earth-destroying faction to control congress and the White House.

So on this Mother’s Day, we need our mothering grief and rage to fill us with Mama Bear energy to protect all we love, and to fight for love itself.

As Valerie Kaur says, we are in transition, and we need to breathe and push. We may be tired, we may feel there is little we can do, but the Spirit will accept that little bit and work to multiply its effect.

The 22nd Psalm begins, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” but it goes on to remind us that the Spirit of nurturing, caring love is the greatest force in the universe. All realms belong to it and are ruled by it, and as long as humanity survives it will be because this love has delivered us from the parts of ourselves that oppose it, the parts that hate.

Jesus was full of that force of love, and he gave it voice. He said in the Gospel of John, “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.” Jesus urged us to make our joy complete by following this Mama Bear path.

He said in the Gospel of Luke that the key to our survival is to love our neighbor as our self. But who is our neighbor? Who is the friend for whom we are to lay down our life? This is what divides love groups from hate groups.

Every hate group believes that it is a love group. Hate groups say that love groups like this congregation are the real hate groups, because we attack the hate group for the way it loves.

The difference between love groups and hate groups is determined by how we answer the question, who is our neighbor, or who is our friend?

Valerie Kaur grew up in the 1980s and 90s in a predominantly white, conservative Christian town. Valerie had the brown skin of a Punjabi Indian and was a member of the Sikh religion. Her best friend as a girl believed Valerie would go to hell unless Valerie proclaimed Jesus as her lord and savior, and the friendship ended when Valerie refused. Once a neighbor brought a church leader to Valerie’s home who clamped her hands on Valerie to perform an exorcism of the devil that was keeping her from being saved.

Christians who tried to convert her believed they were acting out of love, but Valerie was wounded by their refusal to love her as she was. They showed hate by how they treated all who lived outside the bigoted boundaries of their love. Their churches were hate groups.

The Sikh religion taught Valerie to see universal oneness, to see no stranger, to see no enemy. The answer to the question “Who is the neighbor I am to love as my self, who is the friend for whom I should lay down my life,” was absolutely everyone, without exception.

This is what Jesus taught, as well. He answered the question, “who is my neighbor,” with the story of the Good Samaritan who treats a stranger and enemy as part of his own self whose wounds need his loving care.

This was revolutionary love in Jesus’ day, and it still is. The Good Samaritan had to overcome a threat to his safety, he had to overcome the teachings of his religion and tribe that told him to hate Jews, he had to overcome self-interest in every way. Jesus calls us to keep expanding the boundaries of our love group until we include everyone.

Valerie Kaur teaches us ways to overcome hate. Grieving is foundational to revolutionary love. Feeling our rage is, too, fighting to protect what we love, seeing no stranger or enemy, learning to see oneness, saying to ourselves in every encounter with a face we don’t recognize, “You are a part of me I don’t yet know,” trying to understand how opponents are wounded, and what they grieve, tending our wounds and the wounds of others.

Kaur defines love as “sweet labor: fierce, bloody, imperfect and life giving—a choice we make over and over again.... Revolutionary love is the choice to enter into labor for *others*, for our *opponents* and for *ourselves* in order to transform the world around us.... All three practices together make love revolutionary.” Therefore, it can be practiced only in community, making the whole world our love group.

The end for Valerie Kaur, as for Jesus, is joy. She says, “In the face of horrors visited upon our world daily, in the struggle to protect our loved ones, choosing to let in joy is a revolutionary act. Joy returns us to everything good and beautiful and worth fighting for. It gives us energy for the long labor.... It makes the labor an end in itself. I believe laboring in joy is the meaning of life.”

Let us labor as a love group in joy, and in gratitude for all the mothering love that has brought us to this blessed moment and beloved community. Let us pray in silence, opening to let that love guide us and flow through us to transform the world...

A Haiku by Mel Goertz:

Hemlocks, mossy rocks, trillium
by the brook.
Winter melted away.