

LOVE ONE ANOTHER

Feb. 14, 2021

Rev. Richard Maraj

Rev. Richard Maraj: Good morning, everyone, and welcome to Unity of Phoenix Spiritual Center's Sunday virtual worship celebration. I'm Rev. Richard Maraj; so happy you have joined us! And Happy Valentine's Day to each and every one of you!

Today's talk is entitled, "Love One Another," and we look forward to getting into that. But I just want to remind you there are a lot of really great classes going on, and events and activities. Circle groups – great ways to get involved. If you want to know about any of them, all the information you need to find out about them, to register, to participate is on the website. So please check that out for all the wonderful activities going on in our ministry, especially in terms of our classes and our circle groups.

Right now, Rev. Lori is going to lead us in a time of prayer and meditation. And to prepare us for that experience, we will now listen to the choir as they sing "Surely the Presence."

MEDITATION

Rev. Lori Fleming I invite you to join me for a time of prayer and meditation. For a time away from the mundane world of time and space as we begin by closing our outer eyes; taking in a deep, cleansing breath and releasing it slowly; gently letting go of any busy-ness we've had so far today. And take in another mindful breath and, as you let it go, begin to move your awareness within: into that quiet, still place at the center of your being. Into the very depths of your soul: into that place of stillness. That place where peace passes understanding. That place where we are one with the Divine: that God of love – of unconditional love for us.

Our Wayshower taught there is only one commandment: to love God, and to love each other. We practice that daily as we begin by loving ourselves. By recognizing the presence of God of love within that created us; that vitalizes us; that lifts us up out of the old – out of old ideas, out of old ways of being, out of old consciousness. Lifts us up into a mindfulness of the presence of God everywhere in everything – as vast as the cosmos and as close as our very own hearts. For truly, we are one with the Divine.

As we begin to feel God's love more deeply within, our hearts open: open to God's love now. Be one with the presence and the power that created you. Open your heart to God's unconditional love. And the more you open, the more love you can give. And the more loving we are, the more loving the world becomes.

And so, in this divine presence – in this holy moment; in this time of conscious communion with the Divine – our hearts are open fully. Our love is deep and wide and vast. And we are one – not only with the Divine – but with each other. As we begin to see every person through the eyes of love. As we begin to recognize our oneness with all, knowing that we were created by the God of love.

And so we take just a few moments to move more deeply into the silence as we feel the presence of love within.

SILENCE

Mother/Father God, we come in gratitude for this time together to open our hearts more fully to your loving presence. To be one with you, and to be one with all of humanity, as we reach out love out across the world and we count each and every blessing. Thank you, God; thank you, God; thank you, God! And it is so. Amen.

MESSAGE

Rev. Richard Maraj: Thank you, Rev. Lori; that was fabulous! Really, really appreciate that meditation.

So Valentine's Day is a day of celebrating love: celebrating romantic love, intimate relationship love. And so I decided to look up some jokes on love, on marriage, and on relationships. And here we go!

Husband says, *"I love you."* And the wife says, *"Is that you talking, or the wine?"* And the husband says, *"That's me talking to the wine!"*

A young boy says to his dad, *"Dad, I heard that there are some parts in the world where a man doesn't know his wife until they get married!"* And the dad says, *"Son, that's true everywhere!"*

A guy complains to his buddy: *"You know, my girlfriend's really starting to annoy me. I took her out to dinner last night, and she ordered the most expensive thing on the menu: the double Whopper with cheese!"*

The most effective way to remember your wife's birthday is to forget it once.

Now, you'll notice most jokes about love – most jokes about relationships and marriage – tend to focus on the challenging parts! On the frustrating parts. On the parts that aren't easy that make us kind of get a little exasperated. And I find that interesting: that even though love is a thing that we praise most in our culture – the thing that we all yearn and desire for: to be loved, to express love, to be in love – that the jokes that we share about them show that love isn't easy. Loving isn't always smooth. It isn't always pleasant and enjoyable. And yet, love is the most important thing in our lives.

You know, the Bible is a book about love! It says, *"God is love."* *"The greatest commandment is to love God with all of your heart, mind, soul and strength, and to love others as ourselves."* Jesus said numerous times – in just two chapters – he said this: *"A new command I give you. Love one another as I have loved you. So you must love one another."* And then a couple of verses later he says, *"This is my commandment: that you love one another, even as I have loved you."* And a couple verses later he said, *"These things I command you: that you love one another."*

What do you think he's trying to say?!? It sounds like he's trying to say that the most important spiritual directive for our lives is to love one another. It is our spiritual purpose; it is the reason we are here. Because love is the most healing, the most comforting, the most transformational and fulfilling energy and practice that we can engage in in our lives. But practicing love – living love, demonstrating love – is not an easy thing in relationships, and it's not an easy thing in a lot of areas in our lives.

For instance, how do you express love in your political views? I'd bet 100% every single one of us has at least one person in our life that we can't talk politics with; otherwise, it'll get a little testy and messy and tense. I once had a poker game at my house – a "spiritual" poker game – and it was about four years ago, when the election was coming. And my phone popped up something about Trump and the military. And I just said, *"Oh, blah, blah, blah."* Well, all "hell" sort of broke loose, where someone said, *"I can't stand him!"* *"He's a great businessman!"* *"Blah, blah, blah."* I mean, literally, the poker game was over, because things got so heated. And this was among friends of more than 20 years! It got kind of explosive, you know, and very tense. Everybody forgave each other the next game, but that evening... Just to show you – how does love get expressed and experienced and embodied with our political views?

And how does love get expressed with issues like racism? How does love ... How do we love one another in situations of injustice? How do we love one another with times of domestic terrorism and international terrorism? I mean, if you look at our country right now, how are we loving one another? At this point, you know, our country is as divided as I have ever seen it in my life. We are so polarized. Partisan politics have taken over to the point that we are diametrically opposed to one another. It feels like an "us vs. them" at a very strong level. Levels of hate; levels of anger. You know, hate groups are on the increase. More and more people are becoming radicalized. I mean, all these things that are going on

in our culture: events like Charlottesville, the killing of George Floyd; the riot at the Capitol. There is a lot going on: deep-seated issues are coming to a head, so many of them in our culture. And one of the most deep-seated is racism. Is inequality. And is injustice. You know, conspiracy theories and lies. I mean, it really feels messy. And loving one another seems like the farthest thing, in some ways.

I mean, when you look at different news channels, it's like we're living in two different worlds. It is amazing how divisive, and how much conflict that we are experiencing in our country: this country that we all love! How do we show up and love one another through this? How do we practice love? Because love isn't easy, even in a relationship with two people! Or a family or a community. How do we do it in our country? How do we love one another, especially in these difficult times?

So this morning I just want to share with you three ideas of how we can practice and live love through these difficult, tumultuous things in our lives.

The first one is to express love by facing the hard questions and having the hard conversations. You know, one of the things is: We are uncomfortable with difficult conversations. I bet every one of us has swept under the rug or ignored or pretended that some particular topic that we have to address isn't really there. We avoid it at all costs.

Do you know what the four scariest words are in a relationship? "*We need to talk.*" You ever had someone say to you, "*We need to talk,*" and immediately you get anxious? You get nervous? You get a little tense? You're afraid, like, maybe things are going to get worse? You know, when your spouse says, "*We need to talk.*" When your boss says, "*We need to talk.*" When your doctor says, "*We need to talk.*" When your accountant says, "*We need to talk.*" You know, it fills us with a level of anxiety.

I bet you have something in your life right now that you know is important for you. And whether your boss or your spouse or your children that you have to talk to, that you know going through that tough conversation is what needs to happen for there to be healing and reconciliation and understanding, and to get rid of the underlying tension and stress of what's being avoided. I bet every one of us has one of those things now that we are avoiding.

And so, you take that into the difficult conversation of things to relate around politics, and around racism. Because there are things that we need to discuss, and we can't bury and hide. We can't just pretend and say, "*Oh, it doesn't really exist, or there isn't that much*" or, "*We're really doing well.*" Because it keeps rearing its head over and over again. And it represents anything in our lives that keeps popping up that's maybe not being dealt with. You know, maybe not being addressed. Maybe not being healed or have the things that need to be done to bring about greater harmony and peace and understanding.

You know, there are a lot of problems going on in our country, and a lot of things to be addressed. But I do want to focus on racism. And you know why? Because, when you think about it, racism was the owning of one person of another. That they were property. That they could, they would be told anything and everything to do. They could be beaten, killed, hung. This is how horrible that was! And while some of that – on the naked eye – seems to be gone, and seems to have changed, it has actually been so long, it has become systemic. It has come in ways that we don't even realize that it's going on. You know, things like how parents of black children or children of color have to talk to their kids about what would happen if the police stop them, where with white parents, that isn't something that would happen. To go into a store and just be treated with suspicion because of the color of your skin. You know, somebody in our program said that one of the things they didn't even realize they did was that – when they were looking for movies on Netflix – if they saw any movies that had predominantly black actors, they just would go by it, because they figured they had nothing in common with people of color.

I mean, if you look at sports, quarterbacks – still to this day – who are black are referred to with two words: athleticism and they can run. White quarterbacks: they're intelligent and they're good pocket passers. The NFL is acknowledging the challenges of hiring coaches and people of color. So this is

something that needs conversation. It needs understanding. It needs working through it and understanding one another's perspectives. Getting compassion. Because sometimes it's unconscious! When it's systemic, we don't even realize it. And that's why those conversations really need to happen.

You know, Paul Tillich – the 1930s and 40s theologian – said, *“The first law of love is to listen.”* And that's what really needs to happen is: To listen with understanding to the perspective and the experiences of people of color. To listen to Caucasians. To listen to all of us so we have a better understanding. It's not an issue of blaming! It's an awareness. It is an understanding. And to shift perspectives when something is brought to our attention. And, you know, whether it's in a relationship, or whether it is in our country or with racism, any time we bury and hide and don't talk things that need to be talked to, will keep us unhealthy, and will keep undermining and popping up in unhealthy ways.

So the first step to really loving one another on a deeper level – especially in the tough areas – is that we need to be willing to talk, to listen, with understanding and compassion, and with a desire for harmony, and for the happiness and best of all.

The second thing in terms of loving one another – especially in these difficult situations – is to love our enemies, as Jesus said, and to pray for them! You know, I bet you most of us – when we're mad – are thinking, *“I'd never pray for that dirty so-and-so!”* Or if we do pray, the prayer would be, *“God, get 'em for what they did! Get 'em for what they said! Make it even!”* And so it's so important for us, if we want to follow the words of Jesus to love one another, that we need to get to a place where even people we disagree with vehemently, and don't like or can't stand -- whether it's a partner or a spouse or anything that's going on in our country right now – it is, we need to pray for them.

And it's how. Remember when Jesus was asked how to pray by his disciples? He said, *“Pray like this: Our Father ...”* So what he's saying is: When you pray, pray with a consciousness that we are one. That it is our Father. That there is one Source, and we are all God's children, and we are brothers and sisters with one another. That, when we pray for others – by the Law of Cause and Effect – what we pray for others, we pray for ourselves. These are our brothers and sisters! That, even if we don't agree with each other, we are one! And we need to pray from that consciousness.

We need to elevate – with these social issues – we really need to elevate to a higher spiritual perspective, and pray from a higher level of spiritual maturity and spiritual mastery. And that is to know that we are one.

Whoever angers you – whoever you vehemently disagree – pray for them! Send them blessings of peace and love and harmony and happiness. Everyone! If you are a Biden supporter, pray for the Trumppers. If you are a Trumper, pray for Biden. If you are a Democrat, pray for the Republicans. If you're a Republican, pray for the Democrats. Anybody ... If you're an Independent, pray for both! If anyone is pressing your buttons, and you have anger towards them, that's your brother or sister! If we keep sending hate out – and anger – we will never be able to reach the level of harmony and healing.

If you have some anger or upset at the Proud Boys, pray for their peace and healing. For the organization of Black Lives Matter, pray for their peace and healing. We are all one! And it is only through love – it is only through prayer; it is only through unifying our minds in the truth, the greater truth that we are one – that we can ever get healing.

These are not just political issues. They're human issues! They're social issues. And they're soul issues! It is the work that we are here to do: to love one another. Not just a few. Not just the ones we like. But one another. And it is a stretch. This is not easy work. But it's vital and important. If we're serious that we want harmony in our country and we want harmony and prosperity for ourselves, this is the work that we all need to do.

And then the final one I want to talk about is that we need to take a stand to be the thing we want to see more of in the world. Gandhi said it beautifully: *“Be the change you want to see in the world.”* St. Francis wanted to see more peace, so he said, *“Lord, make me an instrument of Thy peace.”*

What is something that you want to take a stand for? To embody more in your family and in your life? Is it peace? Is it love? Maybe it's kindness. Maybe it's compassion. Maybe it's honesty or care. Whatever it is, be the example of the thing that you want to see!

One of the most important ones is for equality. It is for justice. Here are the words of Paul Ferrini. He says, *“The doctrine of equality – the great spiritual teaching of the planet – is contained in the Bill of Rights and the Declaration of Independence. These are not just political documents; they are sacred texts, because they embody the highest truths. A person who attempts to live the law of equality is constantly asked to stretch and go beyond their comfort zone. He is frequently asked to let go of biases, and to take hold of a wider and more generous perspective of all people. She is asked to walk in the moccasins of others.”*

And so, the fact is: If there's going to be harmony, if there's going to be racial equality and justice, it is going to take all of us. And, whether we realize it or not, it also affects all of us. So it will take all of us.

For the last three or four months, Rev. Lori, Rev. Kim and I have been meeting with a group of our congregants who were inspired by the work of the Unity Spiritual Center – or the Unity Center in San Diego – who, for three years, has been doing a program within our church called “Dismantling Racism.” And it has just been felt clearer and clearer that this is the time. And for racism to be discussed in a healthy, whole place, what better place than a Unity church, where our whole doctrine is about we're all created in the image and likeness of God? That we're all one?

And these are never comfortable conversations, but they're important conversations. And so we're going to kick off a program called, “Spiritual Allies for Dismantling Racism.” And you can voluntarily sign up to be a part of some of the groups. Because it's really about awareness. It is about understanding. It is about compassion. Because laws – changing laws – can only do so much. It's about changing consciousness. Changing our mindset. And being aware of some of the things that we don't even realize that is kind of perpetuating and supporting inequality in a lot of ways.

So I really want to invite you – we'll roll out more information in the weeks to come. But if we're really going to transform the way things are, and this divisiveness, we really ... This is one of the areas we need to start. And so I recommend that you participate in these groups on dismantling racism. And if that doesn't suit your timetable, maybe it's just even reading one book or looking at a video. We'll get you a little list that you can do that. Because we all need to take ownership! We need to be the change that we want to see in the world.

You know, we are the United States of America, but we're acting like the Divided States of America. And I believe the soul of this country is calling us to love one another. To express the spiritual gifts that are in us. It is calling us to spiritual maturity and spiritual mastery. Which is having the tough conversations and listening. Which is loving our enemies by praying for them, knowing that there is “Our Father,” that we are one. And taking a stand to embody some quality that we want to see more fully in our community and our country and our world. And especially about living the law of equality.

Can you imagine how much more powerful of a country we'd be if we really did demonstrate this, and really live as the United States of America? As great as we are, we could be even greater. But we must be willing to trust and to practice the commandment that Jesus gave us, which is TO LOVE ONE ANOTHER.

God bless you all!

SOLO

Todd Herzog sings "Family Tree"

We share the same breath
We live in unity
Beyond all borders
We are community
We dance together
Distant relations
We all descend from the same Family Tree
Oh, you and me; yeah, uh huh

When I look in your eyes I see
So much inside of you
Beyond the things society tells me should matter to me
We are connected, you and I, from a common source
One that I could never divorce myself from
We shine with the light of the sun

We share the same breath
We live in unity
Beyond all borders
We are community
We dance together
Distant relations
We all descend from the same Family Tree
Oh, you and me; yeah, uh huh

When we let go of our preconceptions and the things we've been taught
Understanding that cannot be bought
This is our inheritance
We have so much more in common than what separates us
This idea of race is, it's so outdated

What we see on the television escalates our fears
If we buy into what we hear there is no resolution
But if we trust our own eyes and our intuition,
It's a different position
You and I, you and I, we are solutions

We share the same breath
We live in unity
Beyond all borders
We are community
We dance together
Distant relations
We all descend from the same Family Tree
Whoa, you and me; yeah, uh huh

With a light from a distant source
Open eyes and a strong discourse
Listening to God above
You and I can express our love
If we let our defenses fall and we simply embrace it all

All the roots of the tree entwine
All that's left is a love divine

We share the same breath
We live in unity
Beyond all borders
We are community
We dance together
Distant relations
We all descend from the same Family Tree
Oh whoa, you and me; yeah, we all descend from the same Family Tree.

OFFERING

Rev. Lori Fleming: It's that time in our service to give of our gifts and our tithes and our offerings. We're so grateful to those of you who've sent in your checks, who continue to contribute online to keep Unity of Phoenix going. We thank you for that so much!

Our offering blessing is: *"Divine love, through me, blesses and multiplies all that I have, all that I give, and all that I receive."* And so we say thank you, Mother/Father God, for these gifts, for these tithes, for these offerings. We know they are given in love; they are received in love; and that they move through this ministry with the energy of divine love out into the world as good. And that each giver is blessed – heaped up, pressed down and overflowing – for that is the Law. And so it is. Thank you, God! Amen.

CLOSING

Rev. Lori Fleming: We're so grateful you could join us today! We hope you've been uplifted by our service. We hope you have a fabulous week as you go forward!

And now, join me as listening as the choir sings our "Peace Song."

Choir sings "Peace Song":

Let there be peace on earth
And let it begin with me!
Let there be peace on earth
The peace that was meant to be!

With God as Creator
Family all are we!
Let us walk with each other
In perfect harmony!

Let peace begin with me;
Let this be the moment now!
With every breath I take
Let this be my joyous vow:
To take each moment and live each moment
In peace eternally!

Let there be peace on earth
And let it begin with me!

Rev. Lori Fleming: And now will you affirm with me in the Prayer for Protection?

The light of God surrounds us;
The love of God enfolds us;

The power of God protects us;
The presence of God watches over us;
Wherever we are, God is, and all is well!

Have a fabulous week!

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