



Affection and Sparky Anderson

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INVOCATION

We give thanks for this day, which we did not create.
We give thanks for its beauty and promise, and all the opportunities it contains for love and justice, companionship and service.
We give thanks for the blessings of family, friends, and this company of companions.
We give thanks for hand that hold ours when we are hurting, that hold up our bodies when we are weary, and soothe our spirits when we seek solace.
We give thanks for having been given the gifts of trust and love, to give those gifts back to the world and build a greater life for all souls.

CHALICE LIGHTING

We light this Chalice to remember a truth, consecrated through the ages by the service and sacrifice of individuals and communities: There abides a unity and freedom of the Spirit expressed through a love for all souls.

READINGS

First Reading: *Overcoming America/America Overcoming*, by Stephen Rowe

In this reading my colleague, Professor Stephen Rowe, identifies in general ways, the “moral disease” that afflicts modern society, as exemplified by America, and suggests the ways this can be overcome:

The most distinctive legacy of our era is moral disease... [T]he problem with America is that it is the quintessential expression of the modern, the result of turning loose that package of interrelated values which constitutes modernization: scientific rationality, market economy, individualism, and consumerism. And the worst of the modern is its pretense to sufficiency, the way it enfolds and intoxicates, anesthetizing in a pleasant degradation...

For the best of America has been eclipsed by the worst features of modernity,... which... threatens to shade out and suffocate all values associated with higher or deeper meanings, including those most intimate to the living of a human life...

Surviving the modern requires a developed awareness of its limiting and ultimately lethal character, reappropriation of traditional sources for the cultivation of human vitality, and activation of these sources through dialogue with those of other traditions who are also addressing the limitations of the modern. This is profoundly different from fundamentalist reaction which asserts 'good' tradition against 'bad' modernity... I am recommending conscious affirmation not only of some elements of 'tradition,' but also of what is valuable in the modern... [a] land of new beginnings...

Second Reading: Mark 10:17-22, *The Rich Young Man*, English Standard Version (ESV)

In this parable of an encounter with a rich, young man, Jesus recognizes the sovereignty of God over all persons by delivering another Unitarian verse indicating that all persons, including himself, are less good than God. Jesus invites the man to transcend the ethical life he has led, and follow a path that is larger and wider, including doing good AND something more:

And as he was setting out on his journey, a man ran up and knelt before him and asked him, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" And Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone. You know the commandments: 'Do not murder, Do not commit adultery, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Do not defraud, Honor your father and mother.'" And he said to him, "Teacher, all these I have kept from my youth." And Jesus, looking at him, loved him, and said to him, "You lack one thing: go, sell all that you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me." Disheartened by the saying, he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions.

SERMON

"And he loved him," or, "She loved her." Perhaps all else written in the Old and New Testament is a commentary on this.

What are the origins of human affection? I don't mean specifically your feelings towards your beloved, or towards a friend, or your own sense of self-esteem, although all of those could be viewed as instances of affection. But, it is such a mysterious thing, which has been called a feeling and a sentiment, but its origins and how it is elicited, is a mystery: Affection.

There's a man I played football with in high school, who, in the 40 years since has become like our team's Sparky Anderson, the leader of the Big Red Machine, the Cincinnati baseball Reds World Champions of 1975 and 1976. My friend rallies us when one of us is beset with problems, and gets us together to support our school and its football team. Since graduation he's been the glue that binds us to one another, evidencing an affection for all of us that keeps us connected. His generosity to our "band of brothers" is deep. It's even deeper for his own family. I admire him, the *pater familias* to his family and the Sparky Anderson of affection to all his friends!

But, one thing perplexes me. He wants to obliterate all social programs, society's "largess": Welfare, Medicare, Medicaid, and now Obamacare, anything involving societal embodiments of affection; society's largess, its generosity, its charitableness. It's a contradiction, and not a political one, nor a moral one, but one of affection, a contradiction at the core of the human spirit. A recent study shows that inflicting pain in religious ceremonies will increase charitable giving. Generosity is increased when pain is induced. Human affection may naturally run deep but apparently not wide. It does not extend to the stranger.

And yet, "All of us are strangers to people who are 'other' than us," writes Quaker educator Parker Palmer. Even my closest companions, my friends, my children, my beloved is as an 'other' to me, a stranger. "*love's function*," wrote poet e.e. cummings, "*is to fabricate unknowmness*," and to contemplate this in seriousness is to realize affection's truth. We can be coupled with another for decades and wake up, roll over and wonder, "Who *is* this person?"

Professor Stephen Rowe's claims we suffer from a moral disease, and surely a symptom of that disease would somehow involve affection. Rowe contends that the "strain" that is modernism has mutated into a threat. As a philosopher he does not oppose science or rationality, but he is not naïve to its effects. The same scientific genius that gave us the capacity to see and communicate with others across the globe using the cell phone, is used on the subway to watch the Kardashians and Jackass 1 and 2! Genetic understandings have been enormously beneficial, and yet in the market driven, consumerist world of individualism they can also be used to design desirable offspring, even down to hair and eye color! The biggest concern of my students is, "Can I get a job upon graduation?", trumping whether they develop the critical thinking skills to analyze and evaluate all they will encounter from graduation to the grave in order to create a meaningful life. Ironically, this consumerist mentality – "Will *I* get a job?" - obscures the projection they will have 18 completely different jobs in their lifetime. Their anxiety, like their parents and society's, is tragically misplaced.

And the way modernity has rendered a unique moral disease is most in evidence when a student returns from studying abroad in a "third world country" unable to imagine let alone comprehend why human beings who possess so little are so generous. We understand charitable affection completely in terms of the number and amount of possessions, how many we have and how many they don't.

We need to examine affection so it can be a vaccine to treat our moral disease.

I remember growing up just across the Ohio/Indiana line, attending the funeral of my great aunt, one of the four Abshire sisters, along with my grandmother. I remember walking with my grandmother out of the chapel and into the lobby of the funeral home where her two other surviving sisters were in midst of a tug of war, grimacing as if their lives and sacred honor were at stake, the thread between them being a fox stole that had been the possession of their dead sister and had adorned the shoulders of one and not the other! And the fur flew as they grunted and groaned – fake fox fur at that! – and even as a 14 year old I thought then, “There’s my family!”

Family is a form of human affection, connectivity, the way we are tethered to others. Formed by bloodlines and genetics, this bond is so close we don’t often consider it in terms of its form and structure, its morphology. But, that day I learned its morphology, though I didn’t know then that was the learning. It makes you feel real solid and secure sometimes, and so foolish at others. Family is bond is not formed by free consent. You can’t choose your family. This lack of liberty is why I recoiled the first time I entered a Unitarian Universalist church and was greeted by a smiling member who said, “We’re like family here!” Not mine! Because there is no freedom, no liberty of the spirit, you can feel grounded with family, but there is no transformation possible in and through this bond. Two hundred years from now, when my older brother, younger sister, and I will be deep in our graves, I will still be the middle child.

Yet, family is not the only bond of affection that shapes our lives. There is also what could be called fraternal bonds, bonds that we make with those who are not kin, not blood, not family, but come to feel they are. Fraternal bonds are so deep that we describe them in familial terms. We call fraternity comrades, “brothers,” and sorority associates, “sisters,” so close do we become with them. Armed forces veterans talk about their comrades in ways echoing Shakespeare, my “band of brothers.” Men and women fighting for rights, from voting in the last century to marrying in this one, knew and know one another as sisters in the cause, brothers in arms. Often members of groups formed by these kinds of bonds of affection receive new names when welcomed in, like they are birthed into a family. Would it surprise you that George Anderson was given the name “Sparky” for his aggressive play, and later, like a father, was a beloved manager here in Cincinnati and up Detroit? Probably the only thing an Ohioan and a Michigander can agree upon is that the late, great Sparky Anderson was like a beloved father!

We freely enter into fraternal bonds and so they contain a measure of freedom and involve personal transformation. We become different and more because of them. But there is a characteristic of these bonds and the transformation of its participants, and even the larger society towards which the activity might be directed. These bonds are centered in like-mindedness. What makes another my “brother in arms,” my “sister in the cause,” and someone for whom I would give the last measure of my devotion like they were kin? We have like minds, holding the same vision of human nature, human existence, and the remedies for the human condition. Variation is its opponent and dissent its enemy. We are free to join but not necessarily to think. Familiarity breeds fraternal bonds of affection, not strangeness.

And the sad irony of today is that modernism has produced spiritual community in the form of fraternal bonds. In this culture, spiritual community of any kind is conceived in

like-mindedness. Even we who claim to value diversity, fret over what beliefs bind us together.

The spiritual quality of affection is its demand that it be extended to the stranger. “There’s a wideness to God’s mercy,” sings the hymnist because we would not of ourselves extend it to ones we don’t know personally!

Which should possess an irony to us in that the morphology of spiritual bonds forming spiritual community historically in our faith tradition is not familial (the church is not a family), nor fraternal (we all believe this way or that like family), but covenantal. These bonds of affection are distinctive, too. Formed by free consent, but not simply that I freely join this spiritual community. When joining in spiritual community of a covenantal sort I am freely making a promise that is not about or for “me,” but about how I and my spiritual community are obligated to the world. I promise I will take on the disciplines of freedom as a spiritual enterprise. It is not freedom as in license, as in the fallacy that I can believe anything I want and you’d better let me. That has always been impossible. I want never to die, but belief has nothing to do with that. The promise inherent in the disciplines of spiritual freedom is formed from relationship and connected to a sacred, unseen order to all existence drawn by freedom. I promise that I will endeavor to make the world into the mutuality abiding in an affection beyond what I can individually conceive. We will share our destiny, be accountable to one another, share one another’s burdens and joys, uphold one another in all things, guide one another in order to remake the world out there into an affection born of freedom. I promise to live with you in the knowledge that we are strange to each other and do not really know each other’s hearts. I promise to change and be transformed by the sacred order built upon the affection required by this freedom until the order imagined is a world attained.

We are dependent upon structures in existence to lure us out of our individualisms, out of the selfish genes of our families, out of convictions that our communities are the only right and true ones, our narrow thoughts and lifeless creeds. Will you take the promise that forms you into a spiritual community, which can transform you individually as no other bond of affection can, and aim its affection towards the stranger, a love that sets us free because it requires nothing in return?

Jesus encounters a rich young man who has lived according to his beliefs, and who wants to know if by this he will inherit eternal life. Eternal life was the most coveted of human possessions of the time, occupying the hearts and minds of as many then as the state of the economy, or being reasonable, or being your own person does in ours. When Jesus asks him if he has followed the commandments, the ethical beliefs of living the good life, he says yes. The rich, young man and Jesus, strangers to one other. And Jesus loves this stranger. He offers affection to this stranger who, like you and me, possessed such abundance in this life, privileged by possessions and the love of family and friends, perhaps in his time had the equivalent of hundreds of Facebook friends, his Tweets following over a thousand. And those kinds of connections are good. But that is not the spiritual life. It requires something more, something either in addition to or in substitution of. The spiritual life involves going farther, which Jesus invites him to go: *“You lack one thing: go, sell all that you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me.”* Jesus invites him to follow the path of love, something of ultimate and inestimable worth, the allegiance to a

MORE powerful enough to transform individuals and the world as it cannot of itself be transformed. Will you follow, too?

I promise to make affection towards the stranger the focus of my spiritual life. As a spiritual community we promise to the world to make affection towards the stranger the focus of our spiritual life as a congregation. For we are all strangers to one another, only God knows our hearts. And we all are upheld in the affection born of freedom.

AMEN

BENEDICTION

And now, seeing there is naught to fear, and bearing witness to what can never die, let us go forth in the world in peace.

Be of good courage,
Search all things
And hold fast to that which is good.
Render unto no one evil for evil.
Strengthen the faint-hearted,
Support the weak,
Help the afflicted,
Loving all souls,
Searching for the Most High,
And rejoicing in the power of the Spirit.