

## **Speaking with Love**

A Sermon by the Rev. Angela Herrera  
First Unitarian Church in New Mexico  
December 4, 2016

Somehow the sermon signboard and the actual sermon title got out of sync this week. This sermon is called *Speaking with Love*, not *Forward Together*. Maybe the themes those titles imply are not so different anyway. We are, after all, going forward together, not one step back, right?

I have faith that in the future, we will reflect back on this time and see that, overall, it was so. As a country, we are going forward. As a congregation, too, we are going forward during a time of change! And the best way forward is with a hefty measure of love.

There are different kinds of speaking with love: there is explicitly expressing love, as in “I love you.” There is prophetic speech. I spoke about that in a sermon on resistance a couple of weeks ago.

And then there is interpersonal speaking. That’s what I want to focus on this morning. Speaking interpersonally: conversation between two people or among a small group. It’s different than prophetic speech, different than making a public statement, like marching, addressing a room full of fellow Americans, or writing letters or making phone calls to lawmakers whom we may never have met.

Interpersonal speech carries its own set of opportunities and challenges.

One of my professors from Harvard Divinity School, Stephanie Paulsell, tells a story about couples in the 1970s trying to stay connected while the husbands were deployed to submarines with the US Navy.<sup>1</sup> The ban on women serving aboard submarines was lifted six years ago. Before that, the Navy said that allowing women onboard was “cost prohibitive.”<sup>2</sup>

So in the 1970s, it was women writing to the men, and—we can be certain—also some men writing to their seafaring male lovers in an even more coded style. I say “coded,” because it was hard to get messages from land down into the ocean back then. Family members could send them, but due to the limits of communication technology, the messages could only be eight words long.

How can you convey how much you love and miss an intimate partner with only eight words? “I love you, can’t wait to see you.” Eight words. “I think of you every day, my love.” Eight words. “Your mother is driving me crazy, come back.” Eight words. With only eight words to use, nothing would be adequate. It takes a poet

---

<sup>1</sup> Paulsell, Stephanie. “Deep Messages.” *Christian Century*. 15 June 2010. Vol. 127: No. 12.

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.navy.mil/submit/display.asp?story\\_id=52954](http://www.navy.mil/submit/display.asp?story_id=52954)

laureate-- someone like Elizabeth Alexander— to make words “shimmer” in that short length.<sup>3</sup> What to do?

Well, since the Navy only counted bible verses as one word, and the bible is rich with descriptions of love and longing, messages became very... religious.

The women especially loved The Song of Songs.

They would send messages like this, Paulsell says: SOS 1:2. That means Song of Songs, Chapter 1, verse 2.

...and the husband, deep below the surface of the ocean, would look up Song of Songs 1:2 in the Bible. "Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth!" he would read, or maybe SOS 4:7: "You are altogether beautiful, my love; there is no flaw in you," or--in another message to a beloved submerged beneath miles of water--SOS 8:7: "Many waters cannot quench love, neither can floods drown it."

I'll tell you, some verses in the Song of Songs are downright racy. These ladies gave a whole new meaning to SOS for their navymen.

Imagine the wives carefully crafting their messages, reading bible verses more closely perhaps than they ever had in their lives, or maybe even for the first time in their lives, and the men deep beneath the ocean, with bibles filled with dog eared pages and underlined text, trying to decode their eight word love letters.

So much could be hidden within each “word.”

In regular speech, our words also carry hidden meanings. Regular language has its own codes, too. We talk at or to or with each other, trying to understand what each other really means, or we forget to think that deeply about it, because the code is not as obvious as SOS 4:4, “Your teeth are like a flock of sheep.”

Well, I'll bet they didn't use that one. Some of these old lines are really contextual. That's actually my point. When the meaning isn't obvious, or when we forget to try hard at understanding, sometimes we end up reacting to what the word elicits in us, rather than understanding the other person.

In return, we struggle to express ourselves.

Sixteen hundred years ago, the philosopher and theologian Augustine of Hippo commented on how difficult it is to express ourselves. He knew what he wanted to say, he wrote, but when he tried to articulate it, “my words cannot suffice to my heart.”<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> Alexander speaks of words that shimmer in her delightful interview on On Being: <http://www.onbeing.org/program/elizabeth-alexander-words-that-shimmer/246>

<sup>4</sup> Qtd. in Paulsell.

You know exactly what he means, don't you? We feel inept enough sometimes in regular conversation; how much more so when we are feeling deep emotions or the stakes are high!

"Language cannot do all the work of love," Paulsell says. And yet... we live and relate in words.

One thing I've noticed is that when we have more than eight words to work with, we are prone to choose them less carefully.

This is especially true when we are not feeling all lovey dovey, but are distressed by something in the interaction.

Someone says something that rubs us the wrong way, or strikes us as callous, disrespectful, or unfair, and—you know that feeling you get. That resolute or maybe *fighting* feeling in the chest, a little bit of adrenaline [right there.]

My husband says I stick my jaw out, almost imperceptibly, but when I do that he knows the warrior is suiting up for battle.

He has learned to say, "I see that you just did that thing with your jaw. Can we keep each other close?" This interrupts what might have been a chain reaction.

That's the danger in these interactions- chain reactions. We hear something that brings out the warrior, our hearts harden toward the other person, we speak from that place, and elicit the same reaction in them. The more this energy feeds off of itself and grows, the more certain we become of the righteousness of our position and the wrongness of the other person's.

According to the Buddhist nun, Pema Chodron, this dynamic is at the root of all war.

She says we develop a fundamentalist mind, which is "is a mind that has become rigid. First the heart closes, then the mind becomes hardened into a view, then you can justify your hatred of another human being because of what they represent..."<sup>5</sup>

That last phrase is so important: "what they represent."

We have to watch out for making other human beings out to be THE THING we are against. The threat. Our enemies. As Unitarian Universalists we know that they are humans like us, with inherent worth and dignity, that we are interdependent with them and all creatures. When I talk about speaking with love, the love I mean is the spiritual kind—it is speaking from those values of inherent worth and dignity and interdependence. Speaking with concern for the other, with love, if not always with "like."

The ultimate goal of loving speech, just like in nonviolent resistance, is to end up in right relationship, beloved community, with them.

---

<sup>5</sup> Chodron, Pema. Practicing Peace in Times of War. Shambhala: Boston, 2007.

While we can march and show our power in numbers and speak prophetically for justice in our society, and it is important to do so to express our concern and because policy impacts lives, true cultural shift, true transformation into a peaceful society, requires wise hearts, awareness, and connection among individuals.

Here I am using peace in the biblical sense—shalom. It is not merely the absence of war. Shalom implies justice, wellbeing, completeness, prosperity, and tranquility.

To speak with love in all times—or at least in as many times as we beginners can humanly remember—is to participate in transforming our culture.

It's hard work, friends.

What happens when we don't allow our hearts to harden toward the other person? Oh, it's uncomfortable!

We still experience the threat our body registered with that fight or flight feeling or that impulse to strike back. And when we are present and aware of what is within us, we notice that beneath every feeling of threat is a feeling of vulnerability. We are put immediately in touch with our vulnerability. It's so much easier to be defensive and angry than to be vulnerable.

But it is from that place—that tenderness or softness within us-- that speaking with love comes.

Many of us are especially feeling vulnerable at this moment in our country's history. The word courage comes from the latin root *cor*, heart. To speak with love, in touch with vulnerability instead of striking out from anger, is what builds the groundwork for true peace, and it requires courage.

Chodron quotes the German political thinker Rudolph Bahro who says, "When an old culture is dying, the new culture is created by those people who are not afraid to be insecure."

Arun Gandhi, the grandson of Mahatma Gandhi, who as a child was beaten by white youths in South Africa for being "too black," and who later learned nonviolence at his grandfather's side in India, confirms the power of non-violent speech. It is not enough to protest, if we want lasting transformation, we must also be the change we wish to see in the world.

Many of you have heard me use the phrase before: soft front, strong back. That is the posture of speaking with love. It takes strength to keep a softened heart and open mind.

Marshall Rosenberg, in his now classic text, *Nonviolent Communication*, offers a framework to guide our thinking about it.

It has has four parts: noticing, feelings, needs, and requests. We're going to spend a little time on these, and on practices that help us with them. It's a crash course.

When Rosenberg teaches this he does it in four-part workshops—much more time than we have this morning. But I know that if you remember only a few things, you'll find them helpful. If you already know a lot about Nonviolent Communication, then you also know it's hard to do and a refresher is helpful. If you want to learn more about it, you can find lots of information online or you can find Rosenberg's book at the library.

Imagine yourself in a conversation with someone, and they say something that elicits a negative reaction in you.

First, you **notice** what concrete thing you are observing that is connected with your reaction,

Second, you name how you are **feeling** in relation to what you are observing

Third, you become aware of what **needs, values or desires** are causing those feelings in you

And fourth, you might **request** a concrete thing to address those needs.

For example, let say a person you are speaking with accuses you of being overly emotional. It doesn't matter what the topic is. It could be politics, or the logistics of the family holiday dinner, or whether you'll allow your teenager to go on their first date without an adult. When you hear them say you are overly emotional, you get that feeling in your chest. Anger, and... is it a feeling of defense or attack? It's all muddled.

If you are practicing Nonviolent Communication, you take a breath here, and do the first two steps: noticing and feeling.

You notice the thing that you are reacting to. What you notice has to be concrete: in this case, it is that the other person said you were being over-emotional.

Then you name the feeling. What you are feeling has to be an emotion. Not, I feel like he's being a jerk. That's a judgment. That's still a reaction. We're trying to get to the *emotion*, like, "I feel angry." Or offended. Or frustrated. An actual feeling.

So the person said, X, and I felt Y. A concrete observation and a feeling.

Now you need to get to the why. Why are you angry? Well, it's because of what they said right? That's how we usually think of it. But in non-violent communication, we go deeper than that. After all, why should words cause such a strong feeling in us? It's always because of some unmet need, desire, or value. Rosenberg describes this as what is "alive" in us. In this case, you might notice that you feel angry because you have a need to be taken seriously, and you don't see evidence of that happening.

Now you've covered steps 1, 2, and 3: noticing, feeling, and naming the cause of the feeling. You're ready for step four: making a request. What would meet your need?

Rosenberg suggests phrasing it this way: When you did X, I felt Y, because I need Z. Would you be willing to [fill in the blank]?

So it could sound like this:

When you said I am being over-emotional, I felt angry, because I have a need to be taken seriously. Would you be willing to listen reflectively to what my concerns are about this issue? I'd be willing to do the same for you."

You can apply the same steps to figuring out what your conversation partner is reacting to, feeling, needing, and requesting.

For example, "When you said I am being overemotional, I noticed you sounded frustrated. Are you feeling frustrated?"

And if they say yes, you can ask why. Now, if they haven't learned about non-violent communication, they may reply by blaming you. "I'm frustrated because you are over protective of our child!"

But you are curious about what is "alive" in the other person, so you will clarify: "I hear that my comment led to your frustration. But I wonder what need or value is beneath it. You say I'm over protective. It sounds as though you value the independence our child can practice at this age, and you are afraid I'm not allowing him to experience it. Is that right?"

When you get to the heart of it, then you can continue in a conversation to meet both your needs.

In the field of mediation and conflict resolution, we refer to this process as getting past *positions* to *interests*. Rather than focusing on the position a person is taking, whether it is over the height of a fence or the issue of abortion, you look for the values or need that led them to arrive at that position.

When two people stand staunchly in their positions—nothing taller than a four foot fence! Nothing shorter than an eight foot fence!-- it emphasizes the distance between them. It sets up a win-lose situation. One can't come to the other without walking away from their position. But from values and needs we can arrive at shared understandings and from there, areas of agreement. Maybe one person wants to protect their view of the mountains, and the other wants to protect their privacy. A fence with one shorter section might be tastefully designed. Positions are only reflections of the values and needs that inspire them. They are not themselves the values and needs.

When we find ourselves getting wound up, feeling aggressive and hard-hearted, that emotional experience is very seductive. We want to keep going into it, see it through until the end! But that end is unlikely to be aligned with our deepest longings for peace and connection.

Better to learn to notice when that is happening, and step back. Breathe. Take space. Be patient. Allow the emotions to evaporate—they always do—and the softness to return.

Now, about using I-statements. They are really valuable. Use them. But it's important to understand the spirit of this rule. Not all sentences that start with I are "I statements." I-statements are about expressing feelings, values, or needs. They are not sneaky ways to phrase an attack. Let's practice.

"I think you're ridiculous" is *not an I statement*. It's not a feeling, value, or need. It's an insult.

"I'm confused by what I'm hearing," is. It's a state of mind—confusion.

"I feel like you're a Nazi" is ... [say it with me] *not an I statement*. It's a judgment.

"I believe in our constitution's protection against discrimination" is an I statement. It's stating a value.

"I want you to shut up" is *not an I statement*. It's not a feeling, value, or need.

"I feel hurt when you call my perspective stupid" is.

"I think your holiday sweater is ugly" is *not an I statement*. It's an attack.

"I would like to knit you a new sweater," ... careful there. It could still be a sneaky attack.

As important as being in touch with your vulnerability and speaking your feelings and needs is listening reflectively.

Repeat back, in our own words, what you hear the other person saying, to make sure you understand them correctly. Ask them to do the same.

It's like David Whyte said in our reading this morning: One good word is bread for a thousand. Loving speech has rippling effects.

As you practice speaking with love, I encourage you to have patience with yourself and others. Marshall Rosenberg and Pema Chodron don't remember to do these things 100% of the time, and neither do I, and I don't expect you to either.

Be gentle with yourself and others, and be joyful and hopeful in your interactions. They are all opportunities to connect, and that is beautiful.

May we all speak with love, and eat, drink, and be merry this holiday season.

I want to say one more thing before we sing our closing song and that is *thank* you. Thank you to every single person who made a pledge this year. We are at 95% of our goal for December 31<sup>st</sup>. That means all of you who made small or large pledges really made a difference—they add up fast to the amount of money it takes to run

this big, brave, loving place for another year. Next year's budget includes a big well deserved raise for our director of education who is leading such an amazing program for our kids and strengthening the sense of community among families during this time of great pain in our country. Increasing the salary for that position rewards her, and it is a way to encourage talented staff people to stay with our children's programming for a long time, reducing turnover, as parents have told us they want.

We have also grown our music program this year from one choir and just a 10 hour per week director, to an almost full time director who now leads two choirs, a meditative singing group, children's music, and oversees all of the music in our services so we ministers don't make you sing the same Christmas carols over and over again—true story, I almost did that this week. Susan is teaching our kids protest songs, and she's going to get us singing while we head out to Women's March in January. Music has always had tremendous power for bringing people together and we know this is the moment to make that happen.

If you haven't made a pledge or renewed your pledge from last year we still have about \$40k to go. We can do it. You can help keep us from having to cut back right when we need to be reaching out the most. There are pledge cards in the seat backs and in the church office, you can go online.

Thanks again.