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There is a conversation happening in my clergy study group; a conversation about a question. The question is: How much should we talk in church about what's happening in the news?

On the one hand, church is not a newspaper editorial column. It doesn't exist to ride the ups and downs of a news cycle. We don't want to get distracted by the news's distractions, by who tweeted what and what line of clothing Nordstrom is or isn't carrying. You didn't need to come here to do that. You can do that at home.

You can do it anywhere you want, wherever there's a smartphone or a radio or a television, which is pretty much absolutely everywhere. You can do it anywhere you want, and sometimes you end up on the ups and downs of the news cycle when you don't want, because it's in on a screen in the airport or a waiting room.

You don't need church for that.

Even the bigger stuff, federal courts volleying rulings and appeals from one state to another and on up the ladder to the Supreme Court—have you ever seen that YouTube video of a pack of otters watching a butterfly?

We could be like that, all in unison just [looking all around].

By the way did you know that a group of otters is called a romp? Best name ever. Do you know what a group of alligators is called? A congregation.

But that's not what we're about, is it. We're not here to romp through the news. Or to snap up every thing that hits the airwaves.

Church is about the transcendent. Church is about the things we perceive when our attention cuts through all that noise and distraction, when we see more deeply, when we align ourselves with what is sometimes known as God, or what Zahra Noorbakhsh [**nor-bosh**] is referring to when she says the universe is unified by a source of compassion.<sup>i</sup>

Noorbakhsh is not a theologian. She's a comedian. She co-hosts the podcast Good Muslim Bad Muslim. The show got its name from a hashtag conversation between the co-hosts. Noorbakhsh and Taz [**tazz**] Ahmed are both young, feminist women, and both are Muslim.

They explain:

To the Muslim community, we are "bad" Muslims - we listen to music, we don't pray regularly, we date or get married to white men (Zahra), identify as

punks and radicals (Taz), we perform and share our lives with comedy and writing. So we are bad. So so bad.

To non-Muslims, we are "good" - we don't drink, we don't do drugs, we are not criminals, we are social justice activists and community leaders. We are successful, published, accomplished.

Also, they add, some non-Muslims also call them good Muslims precisely for violating orthodox Muslim rules or traditions, and some call them bad Muslims just for being brown and Muslim in a post 9-11 world.<sup>ii</sup>

Noorbakhsh makes a lot of cracks about what other people perceive as contradictions to her Muslim identity, for example, being married to, as she puts it, a "whitey-white atheist infidel."

And even though it's clear that she doesn't see herself as a contradiction, and Islam and her Iranian-American roots are important parts of her identity, until recently, she had not been interested in one of the pillars of Islamic religious practice: the Fatihah [**fah**-ti-hah], the prayer that Muslims recite five times per day.

When Noorbakhsh was little, her father took her religious upbringing very seriously. He tried to teach her the value of her faith. He would tell her, for example, "Don't say God. When people say 'God' they're thinking of a man god, and that's as bad as idolatry. We shouldn't turn people into gods. Say, 'Allah!' Allah is the everything in the universe!"

But Noorbakhsh would sit on her prayer rug and defiantly daydream. The Fatihah wasn't her thing. And, she points out, popular culture kept seeping in anyway. Even her Qur'an translated God's pronoun as "he" in the English version.

But then the election happened. A man who had been promising a Muslim ban and a registry, and whose candidacy had encouraged white supremacists like no other, won.

Hate crimes spiked.

Noorbakhsh found herself feeling scared and grasping for comfort; trying to remember the words of the Fatihah, which goes, in part:

In the name of Allah, the infinitely Compassionate and Merciful.  
Praise be to Allah,  
The Compassionate, the Merciful.  
You alone do we worship, and You alone do we ask for help.

The prayer her father had taught her when she was little affirms that the universe is unified, finally, not by the whims of people, but by the Everything, a source of infinite compassion.

It's like the meditation song we sing: There is a love holding us, there is a love holding all that we love.

We need that compassion, that love. We need it flowing into us, surrounding our hearts with peace and comfort. And we need it flowing from us, transforming everything it touches.

The news of the world bats us about, distracting us from the transcendent, yet the best way to connect with that transcendent love is not to remove ourselves from the world but to devote ourselves to loving it and being present to it in a way that transcends its vicissitudes.

As the travel ban made its way through the courts this week, it was pointed out that no person from the seven named countries has ever carried out a terror attack on American soil.

The New York Times added that the State Department lists many other countries as either safe havens for, or state sponsors of terrorism. The one that sends the most people to the United States is not in the middle east at all. It's Colombia.<sup>iii</sup>

My husband is from Colombia. When he became an American citizen after 9-11, we were informed during the naturalization ceremony, that unlike my citizenship, his could be revoked.

"Don't let your husband leave the country," a Palestinian Muslim acquaintance warned me.

That night I dreamed I was hiding my husband inside my self.

We are about the same size. He has just wasted some of his 135 pounds on extra height.

It is one thing to love this world when things are going your way. It is another thing entirely, when the world breaks your heart.

And yet that is precisely what we must do. We must not allow ourselves to become cynical, or lazy, or to indulge in the fantasy that we are powerless.

We must actively love this world, and the people in it, especially when it is most difficult to do so. That is how we experience the great source of compassion, the love that holds all. Not by getting caught up in the roller coaster of news stories, but by being deeply present, and by cultivating that same boundless love within ourselves.

My answer to my clergy group's question, how much should we talk about the news in church, is: not every week, but if we are doing church right, then everything we do here is relevant to our world, and helps us live in it and influence it with strength, love, and compassion.

When Noorbakhsh went searching for the source of infinite compassion, she instinctively turned to a devotional practice: prayer.

Devotion is a word with a couple of different meanings. It is an orientation of the heart, but it is also a practice.

When a love is new or very enthusiastic, it naturally inspires a heart kind of devotion: adoration and singular focus. But as time passes, or if that love is challenged, practices of devotion nurture and sustain it.

This is true in the kind of love we experience with one other person (intimate love), as well as with our loving orientation toward life and the world, our feeling of connection with something greater than ourselves—however you might define that.

Intimate love and that larger kind of love are closely related.

Our ancient scripture this morning, from Paul's letter to the Corinthians, is a traditional reading at weddings. But what many people don't know, or they forget, is that Paul wasn't talking about romantic love at all in that letter. He was writing to a congregation that had fallen into bitter conflict.

He was calling their attention back to higher things.

The Buddhist teacher and author, Thich Nhat Hanh, writes that if you have true love between yourself and one other person, it will eventually grow to encompass us all.

In his book *How to Love*, he sometimes makes reference to a husband or wife, but the same teachings easily apply to other loving relationships, whether it is love for a friend or family member, young or old.<sup>iv</sup>

And so, since this is Valentine's weekend and there are hearts everywhere, let's spend some time with this idea of his: that true love grows to encompass us all; and *in spite* of it being Valentine's weekend, we will not be referring only to romantic love, but to any close, loving relationship.

First, in the same way it is easy to love the world when things are going your way, it is probably easy to be devoted and even to practically worship your beloved when you first meet them.

Whether it is a new romantic relationship, or bonding with a baby, or a friendship you have just struck up with someone who you feel immediate affection for, you may even find yourself putting the other person on a pedestal.

Can you put a baby on a pedestal?

Well, let me ask you this: have you ever known a parent who was disappointed in their child? At what point did the parent lose their sense of connection and limitless affection?

We put people on a pedestal when we project our expectations onto them. Without realizing it, we expect they will not disappoint us.

But when you're up on a pedestal, what's the only direction you can go? Down. One step in any direction and bam, you're back on the ground with the rest of us.

That is precisely what our beloveds do: they disappoint us. They fail at meeting our every expectation. We do this too, from our beloveds' perspective.

If we are attentive and aware, we realize in that moment that we have been projecting expectations, and perhaps have become disconnected from our loved one's true experience and feelings. It's time to be curious.

Thich Nhat Hanh says that "understanding is love's other name."

Our second reading this morning was the set of mantras he recommends to people who seek to love one another very truly. The mantras increase our connection and expand our understanding. When we practice them, they become devotional practices.

**The first one is "I am here for you."** When we are truly there for our loved one, we give them our full presence, our full attention. We listen to them, with a sense of curiosity rather than judgment, with a desire to connect rather than to react. So one way of being there is listening attentively, and trying to really understand what our loved one is sharing with us.

Another way to be there for someone is to share joy with them. We tell them what we appreciate about them. We perform acts of lovingkindness like making them tea or bringing them breakfast in bed for no reason, or holding the door. We send them a little message to let them know we are thinking of them, or give them flowers, or plan an outing that we know they will especially enjoy. We speak the mantra "I am here for you," and we show it through our presence and lovingkindness.

Now, one thing about lovingkindness is that it's hard to come up with any if all you have inside you is exhaustion, fear, and resentment.

In the wedding homily that I deliver to couples I marry, I always tell them that to commit to their marriage is also to commit to taking responsibility for their own self care. We can't love someone else properly if we have not begun by being kind to ourselves.

Thich Nhat Hanh says, "When we feed and support our own happiness, we are nourishing our ability to love. That's why to love means to learn the art of nourishing our happiness."

**The second mantra is "I know you are there and I am happy."**

This is a mantra of gratitude. It's bigger than it sounds. To truly know, to grasp what it means, that our loved one is there is to grasp that our time together in this life is temporary.

It is also to appreciate that of all the ways the atoms could have combined into molecules and the molecules into life and life into its myriad expressions, it is a miracle that your path crossed with your loved one's. It is a gift.

None of us is flawless at living out this gift. This mantra, "I know you are there and I am happy," is also an acknowledgement that our loved one is doing the best they can to be there for us a given moment.

On so many levels, we are happy they are there.

**The third mantra is "I know you are suffering."** Because the nature of life is change, some suffering is inevitable. Some suffering is also self-inflicted.

Whether we perceive our loved one's suffering as inevitable or self-inflicted, we show them compassion by acknowledging without judgment that we know they are suffering.

**The fourth mantra is "I am suffering."** Sometimes, because of pride, we don't want to tell our loved one that we are suffering. Sadness comes out as anger. Fear comes out as an accusation or a demand. We may not even want to acknowledge it to ourselves.

It feels empowering to be angry, right? It feels vulnerable to be sad or scared. But by naming our suffering out loud to our loved one, we allow them to know us better, and hopefully to offer us the comfort of their empathy and presence.

**The fifth mantra is "This is a happy moment."** Any moment in which we are speaking these mantras is a moment in which we are experiencing a little more connection with our loved one. No matter what else is happening, a moment of love and connection is a happy moment.

You can apply this to other kinds of moments, too. We may be experiencing physical pain, but can say it is a happy moment because we are grateful to be alive and to have the companionship of the people with us.

We can savor simple things like a sip of fresh water or a breath of fresh air. We can express love for another, which gives our lives meaning. Any moment can be regarded as a happy moment if, instead of only resisting what we dislike about it, we turn our attention to what we are grateful for.

Finding something to be grateful for does not mean we have to feel grateful for everything that is happening. Instead it's a practice that helps us tune into all of the resources of comfort, gratitude, and beauty that are available to us in a given moment. We especially need that when whatever else is happening is unpleasant.

## **The sixth and final mantra is “You are partly right.”**

This is a mantra of humility. When your loved one gives you a compliment, say thank you, but also add, you are partly right. We all have both complimentary and unflattering sides to us. Saying “you are partly right” with a smile acknowledges the good without letting us slip into thinking we are more perfect than we are, or— heaven help us-- more perfect than our loved one.

You can also use it when someone criticizes you, or expresses something you disagree with. “You are partly right” allows us to acknowledge what is true about whatever the other person is expressing, even if it is not the literal meaning of their words, while making room for other things to also be true.

I am here for you.

I know you are there and I am happy.

I know you are suffering.

I am suffering.

This is a happy moment.

You are partly right.

I invite you to write these on your heart. Teach them to a loved one, and try saying them to each other every day for ten days. See what happens.

See also, how practicing loving one person this way—with humility, compassion, and gratitude—begins to expand our hearts.

What would it feel like to speak these mantras from your heart to the world?

I am here for you, world. I am curious about what you are expressing: fear, a feeling of scarcity, the suffering that comes with change. I am here for you.

I know you are there and I am happy. Happy for the oceans, mountains, and sky. Happy for people coming together across social boundaries, to stand with each other. Life is a gift, love is a powerful force, and I am happy.

I know you are suffering, world. I see it all around me. In ICE raids. In hate crimes. In the despair of economic neglect. In environmental destruction. I know you are suffering.

I am suffering. When my world suffers, I suffer.

This is a happy moment. Where there is love, there is hope.

You are partly right. I acknowledge what is true, and I acknowledge that I don't know everything.

Love is the basis of the world's great religious traditions. Love of creation, love of neighbor, love for the stranger, who is your neighbor.

Love is also the basis of our Unitarian Universalist social justice work. At coffee hour in the Social Hall after this service, the Social Justice Council is hosting a Share the Love action you can take part in.

They have postcards to express our gratitude to others who are working for love and justice at this time. You're invited to drop by and fill one out. You can write it to one of the people on the list of suggestions the council prepared, or you can write it to someone else you know. Think of it as a way of saying, "I know you are there and I am happy." It's part of our denomination's 30 Days of Love campaign.

I am thinking again now of the compassionate spirit of the Fatihah:

In the name of Everything that is infinitely Compassionate and Merciful.  
Praise be to the Everything,  
The Compassionate, the Merciful.  
To you alone do we ascribe ultimate worth,

From the unifying source of Compassion, we seek help.

May you receive whatever comfort or help you need in your life right now. Whether you are judged by others as good or bad in any particular moment, may you remember that you are a miracle, and may you nourish your happiness.

May love flow to you and through you, and may you feel your belonging in the Everything, the Compassion, the Love that holds all.

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<sup>i</sup> Noorbakhsh, Zahra. "After Trump's Election, A Nonpracticing Muslim Returns To Prayer." *NPR*. NPR, 18 Jan. 2017. Web. 11 Feb. 2017.

<sup>ii</sup> Noorbakhsh, Zahra, and Taz Ahmed. "Podcast." *#GoodMuslimBadMuslim*. N.p., n.d. Web. 11 Feb. 2017. Comments on website and in first episode of podcast.

<sup>iii</sup> Park, Haeyoun, Karen Yourish, and Gardiner Harris. "In One Facebook Post, Three Misleading Statements by President Trump About His Immigration Order." *New York Times*. N.p., 6 Feb. 2016. Web. 6 Feb. 2017.  
<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/02/06/us/politics/why-trump-chose-the-seven-countries.html>

<sup>iv</sup> Hanh, Thich Nhat. *How to Love*. Berkeley, CA: Parallax, 2015. Print.