

Rev. Kim K. Crawford Harvie
Arlington Street Church
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Love Offering

I had never of Turkish author and rock music lyricist Elif Shafak before I stumbled on her TED talk on National Public Radio. As I tuned in, she was telling this story, and I was captivated. Born in France and having lived in Jordan and Germany as well as Turkey, she says,

“In my mid-20s, I moved to Istanbul – the city I adore. I lived in a very vibrant, diverse neighborhood where I wrote several of my novels. I was in Istanbul [in 1999] when the earthquake hit.... When I ran out of the building at three in the morning, I saw something that stopped me in my tracks.

“There was the local grocer, ... a grumpy old man who didn’t sell alcohol and didn’t speak to ‘marginals.’ He was sitting next to a [cross-dresser] with ... a long black wig and mascara running down her cheeks. I watched the man open a pack of cigarettes with trembling hands and offer one to her. And that is the image of the night of [the] earthquake in my mind today.

“[In] the face of death and destruction, our mundane differences evaporated, and we all became one, ... if [only] for a few hours.... A conservative [grocer] and a crying [cross-dresser] smoking together on the sidewalk....”

Here is a profound truth about how deeply interdependent we are: At any moment, the people in our presence might mean for us the difference between life and death. Less dramatically but far more importantly, our neighbors, as the Golden Rule calls them, our neighbors *do* mean for us the difference between isolation and loneliness and life abundant.

Elif Shafak quoted a stanza from a poem¹ by Turkish poet and Sufi mystic Yunus Emre. Here's the whole thing:

G*d permeates the whole wide world,
 Yet G*d's truth is revealed to no one.
 You better seek G*d in yourself,
 You and G*d aren't apart; you're one.

Come, let us all be friends for once.
 Let us make life easy on us.
 Let us be lovers and loved ones.
 The Earth shall be left to no one.

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Two weeks ago, Rev. Catie Scudera, our former intern minister, was installed as the senior minister at our congregation in Needham, Massachusetts. For the occasion, her mother and grandmother made her a new preaching stole, depicting the great pageantry of the close of the story of Noah's ark. There is the boat, and the animals, the sea, a dove, and, at long last, the good, green earth; and there, arching across the sky, the rainbow. Rev. Catie especially loves the rainbow.

We tend to think of the story of the great flood as Biblical, but it is told not only by Jews and Christians, but by Sumerians,² Hindus,³ and Greeks,⁴ by the K'iche' of Guatemala, the Maya of pre-Colombian Americas, the Muisca of Colombia, the Lac Courte Oreilles band of Lake Superior Ojibwe – peoples from many cultures, on many continents.⁵

And all the variations end the same: as the floodwaters recede, G*d draws that rainbow in the sky as a symbol of G*d's covenant with the good people who lived to tell the story and all those who will come after them. The covenant – the promise – was that G*d would never destroy the earth by water again.⁶ The rainbow, sign of the covenant, establishes the

¹ Yunus Emre, *Hak chiana doludur*; adapted from a translation by Prof. Dr. Talât Sait Halman

² Please see the Sumerian *The Instructions of Shuruppak* – 1700 BCE or older

³ Please see *The Mahabharata, Book 3: Vana Parva: Markandeya-Samasya Parva: Section 186*

⁴ in the myth of Deucalion, son of Prometheus

⁵ Please see <http://gnosticteachings.org/faqs/scripture/3394-what-is-the-meaning-of-noah-and-the-ark.html>

⁶ Genesis 9:11

sacredness of human life. Modern interpretation of this passage focuses on that sacredness.⁷

[I'm going to interrupt myself to say that, on Tuesday, when I was writing this sermon, reflecting on our profound interconnectedness and covenant and generosity, it never occurred to me that on Friday, the federal government would impose the death penalty in the Boston Marathon bombing case. We, in Massachusetts, have abolished the death penalty. The Richard family, who suffered the most grievous losses in the bombing, have spoken so clearly and so eloquently against it. And killing people who kill people only compounds violence; it has in no way proven to be a deterrent to yet more violence. Rather than proffering the healing of justice to the survivors of the bombing, the politics of the death penalty insures their ongoing suffering through endless appeals. It is uncivilized. G*d's covenant with Noah, the rainbow, signaled that since human beings are made in the image of G*d, murder shows not only contempt for our sacredness, but also contempt for G*d.⁸

As people of a covenantal faith, we are uniquely positioned to talk about this, and act on it, and I hope and trust we will.]

A *covenant* is a sacred promise. Here at Arlington Street, every Sunday morning, we invoke our great covenant with one another, affirming that love and service are at the heart of this congregation; and dedicating ourselves to live together peacefully; to speak truthfully, with love; and to help one another. And once a year – that would be today, and really, what an extraordinary time to be doing this – we renew that covenant. We say, Yes, I'm in; count me in for the love offering. I cast my lot with this beloved community. It is here that I choose to do the good, hard, and wondrous work of gathering with like-minded, like-hearted spiritual companions to grow my soul. It is here that I choose to be all in; to give richly of my time, talent, and treasure, and to receive in kind. In kind – in kindness – as kin: deeply interdependent, called from isolation and loneliness to life – sacred life – life, abundant, loving and loved.

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⁷ Genesis 9:6.

⁸ Genesis 9:6.

For their book *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us*, Robert Putnam and David Campbell parsed the studies on the relationship between being religious and being generous. They began with the assumption that people who are affiliated with a faith tradition must be generous because they'd been inspired by stories like *The Good Samaritan* or, frankly, they were terrified they'd go to hell if they weren't. I would have assumed that, too.

We're all wrong. It turns out there's no correlation between people's theology and generosity.

So why do we we give?

The secret ingredient is love.

I know you think I made that up! But it's true. Putnam and Campbell concluded that the more robust social networks people have within their congregations – the more friends or people we know and care about right here – the more we give of our time, talent, and treasure.

How really fabulous that Queen Cheryl and David and the Sidewalk Ministry Team greeting us with bubbles means that we can afford to pay our very un-sexy \$45,000 of fixed costs such as lights, heat, phones and – sorry to say the S-word – another \$5,000 for snow removal!

How extraordinary that the fact that we shake hands and say good morning to one another, that we join hands for the final blessing each Sunday, means that we can afford to hire professional help for the kids and support a \$37,000 Religious Education program!

How amazing that the fact that, during our Candles of Sorrow and Joy, the entire congregation will pray for you and with you, and, more often than not, pray in the world with our hands and feet as well as our voices, means that we can have a \$57,000 music program, with a thousand or two more thrown in for an orchestra on Easter and trumpets on Christmas Eve!

As people of faith, we are called to experience everything we receive and everything we can give as a love offering.

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I want to finish with a story Rabbi Laurence Kushner tells,⁹ as he heard it from his rabbi, a story about a rich man and a poor man and a synagogue in a small town in the north of Israel.

During Sabbath services, the rich man was sleeping, as usual. Every once in a while, he would wake up just enough to shift positions to get a little more comfortable on the hard wooden bench. Once, in his twilight dreaming, he heard the chanting of the verses in Leviticus in which G*d instructs the children of Israel to place twelve loaves of bread on a table in the ancient wilderness tabernacle.¹⁰

When the service ended, the rich man awoke and, rather than understanding that he had simply heard the day's Torah reading in a moment of lucidity, he thought that G*d had come to him in his sleep and asked him, personally, to deliver twelve loaves of bread.

He thought it an odd request, but who was he to argue with G*d? He left and returned with challah, carefully arranging the loaves next to the Torah scrolls in the ark, the holiest place in the synagogue. After praying, "Thank you, G*d, for telling me what you want of me. I am grateful to serve you," he left.

Just after he'd gone, the janitor, a poor man, entered the sanctuary. Before he began cleaning, he prayed, "O, G*d, my family is hungry. Please help us." And you know where this is going; when he opened the ark, there was the answer to his prayers. "A miracle!" he exclaimed. "And so fast! Blessed are you, O G*d," and he ran home with the bread for his family.

Not long afterwards, the rich man returned to the synagogue, curious as to whether or not G*d had eaten the challah. Slowly, reverently, he opened the ark. Imagine his surprise! "O, G*d," he said. "I'm so happy you like the challah. I'll bring more next week. How about some with raisins?"

True to his word, after the next Sabbath day services, the rich man tucked twelve loaves of raisin bread into the ark. And again, after everyone was gone, the janitor came to clean. "O, G*d," he prayed, "my family ate

⁹ Please see Rabbi Laurence Kushner, *Eyes Remade for Wonder*

¹⁰ Leviticus 24:5-9

seven loaves of your bread. We sold four, so that we might have milk. And we gave one to those poorer than we. Now the bread is gone, and we have nothing. Again, I beseech you to help us.” And again, his prayer was answered.

Week after week, the ritual continued, to the astonishment and delight of everyone involved. And then one day, the rabbi was detained after services, and watched it all unfold. He called the two men together.

The rich man was disappointed that it wasn't G*d who was eating the challah. The poor man was disappointed that it wasn't G*d who had made the challah. Both men were afraid that G*d would no longer be present in their lives.

The rabbi asked them to look at their hands. “Your hands,” he said to the rich man, “are the hands of G*d, feeding the poor.

“And your hands,” he said to the poor man, “are the hands of G*d, welcoming gifts from the rich.

“Continue this ritual of giving and receiving,” he instructed them, “and G*d will be present in your lives. In both giving and receiving, when we reach out to another, our hands are the hands of G*d.”¹¹

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Beloved spiritual companions,

The earth is shaking. With trembling hands, the conservative old grocer offers a cigarette to the weeping cross-dresser and they sit together on the sidewalk, in the dark.

Come, let us all be friends for once.

Let us make life easy on us.

Let us be lovers and loved ones.

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The rainbow, sign of the covenant,
calls us out of isolation and loneliness;
calls us to the sacred promise to honor life

¹¹ Thanks to my colleague of blessed memory, Rev. Jen Slade, who shared this story with me. *¡Presente!*

and to live life abundant, loving and loved;
calls us to experience everything we receive
and everything we give
as a love offering.

May we make of our lives a love offering.

When we reach out to another, may our hands be the hands of G*d.