



Reading. "Love First" from *Blessing the World: What Can Save Us Now*, Rebecca Parker.

Sermon

One of the things Laurie and I wait for is Sunday evening. She finishes her work week on Saturday, I finish mine on Sunday afternoon. Not that I don't love you all, because as you can probably tell I love being your minister, but it's good to get away and be in my private life after a week's work, and truth be told Laurie waits for the time that I am all hers. So at about quarter to eight on Sunday evening we make two big bowls of popcorn and get ready for *Desperate Housewives* and *Brothers and Sisters*.

We used to watch *Extreme Home Makeover*, which is just before *Desperate Housewives*, but we quickly learned that if we wanted any semblance of a peaceful evening, we had to stop watching it, because I would inevitably get so offended by the whole premise on which it's built that I'd start yelling at the TV about politics and values and what a horrible message the show was giving to its audience. There's a saying you can take the minister out of the pulpit but you can never take the pulpit out of the minister.

Now you might wonder why, what's so wrong with a show like *Extreme Makeover*. It's not because I think the people they help don't deserve it, and not because I think it's wrong to help other people. It's because the show isn't about love first. In our reading, Rebecca Parker talks about Hurricane Katrina, and how millions of dollars was raised for emergency relief after disaster struck. She doesn't criticize the desire to be helpful, but she is critical of the fact that the disaster could have been averted if we had our priorities right, if we had love first, rather than love as a kindly gesture issued only after the roof has fallen in.

Now I realize that some of you may know nothing about this reality TV show, so let me tell you about it. In *Extreme Makeover*, the focus is always a family that has hit rough times and the symbol of their struggle is that all American symbol, the family home which in our culture is understood to be the sign of financial success and family security. Our homes so often demonstrate to the world around us and ourselves that we've made it. That is if the home is well kept, in a good neighborhood and conforms to the expectations of middle class society. The homes in *Extreme Makeover* are often anything but. They are usually in horrible disrepair, inadequate for the needs of the family, and difficult to live in. The people living in them are in trouble. They may have lost their jobs or a spouse or are disabled. They feel trapped and helpless. It's like they're in this inevitable downward spiral and they don't know how they're ever going to get out. The state of their home is a symbol that there is something very very wrong with their lives.

And then, in comes *Extreme Makeover* to the rescue. The star of the show is Ty Pennington, a 30s something kind of rugged handsome goofy guy who bounces in with all kinds of funky energy and a desire to help. He sends the family away on a vacation they would never be able to afford. Then dozens, sometimes hundreds of volunteers are rounded up, and the makeover begins. Sometimes the home is completely demolished, other times it is gutted and redone from the inside out. The results are always stunning.



When it's done, the family is brought back. And the way the family is brought back is extremely staged. The Extreme Makeover Bus is parked in front of the home. The family stands behind the bus so they can't see their new home, and they are surrounded by all the volunteers who have worked on it. And then, Ty shouts the famous words.... "MOVE THAT BUS!!!" As the bus pulls away, their new home is revealed. The family screams, they cry, the volunteers applaud wildly, and then the family is taken through their new home. More tears, more shrieking, effusive expressions of gratitude. The show ends with cameos of the family talking about how wonderful it is, and at the end there's Ty, almost choked up, offering words of comfort and hope.

So why do I so dislike this show? Like I said, it's not that I think any of those families don't deserve a great home and when I've been able to make it to the end of a show I'm always really glad for them. And it's not like I don't think it's good to help people, but what's the larger message that we're getting here? Is this show really about the family who is being helped, or it is about the people who are helping them? There's no mutual relationship here. There's the poor helpless family, whisked off their feet by showers of generosity, and then there's the people who come in, out of the goodness of their hearts, to save them. The family does all the receiving, and the volunteers and Ty do all the giving. It's an unequal relationship – with one party being saved and the other party doing the saving. The technical term for this is paternalism, which literally means the act of fathering. It's like the ones doing the saving are the parent, and the ones being saved are the children. It's the assumption that the poor are helpless and passive and it's the do gooders who need to go in and save them.

This was the model of social justice for many years in most religious organizations. How many of you grew up in churches where you had mission Sunday and you'd watch a slide show presented by a missionary about the work of the church for poor children in Africa and all we had done to help them? Those children were put on display for us. And now we're putting poor people on display for our self-gratification so that we can feel good about ourselves. There's an arrogance there, a self-righteousness, and if you look underneath, a sense of superiority. "We" are going to help "them." That's paternalism.

What I really don't like about this show is that it doesn't change anything about the circumstances that pulls these families into such poverty. In Extreme Makeover, the answer to hard times is private charity. You know how sometimes the local news will do a story about a family facing hard luck, maybe a child needs an operation and the family doesn't have insurance, and then people send in thousands of dollars, and everybody feels really good about themselves and pats themselves on the back for doing such a great thing? Well, of course it's great that a child who needs an operation can have it. That's show it should be, but if we put love first, we would have universal health care, and these tragic things wouldn't happen. For every family that gets a home on Extreme Makeover, there are millions who still struggle. We're giving millions, billions to Haiti right now, but if the International Monetary Fund had put in place real means for Haiti to develop an infrastructure, instead of burying it in interest payments for loans owed to rich countries, the Haitian people would not be suffering nearly as much as they are because there would be effective emergency response systems that kicked in as soon as the disaster occurred. This doesn't mean that we shouldn't be supporting Haiti with relief funds as much as we can, but let's be realistic, it's not the whole picture.



I find myself thinking that if we put as much energy into working on the real problems as all those thousands of volunteers put into building homes for individual families, this would be a different world.

And that's why Home Makeover makes me so mad, because I believe that shows like this allow us to fool ourselves into thinking we're solving the problems of the world.

To use Rebecca Parker's words, "Such a view of life is not sufficient. ... We need to love from the start – not as an emergency strategy when everything has gone wrong. .. It is not sufficient to relegate love to a few moments of sentiment. It is not enough to address injustice in the moment. The whole pathway must be just."

For Rebecca Parker, Unitarian Universalist and United Methodist minister, and president of Starr King School for the Ministry, these are theological issues. These are religious issues. For Rebecca Parker, the most important element of our theology is our covenant to affirm and promote the interdependent web of all existence, of which we are a part. If you're unfamiliar with our principles and purposes, they're in the front of the grey hymnal. Actually I'd encourage you to open your hymnals and have a look at them. When you read those seven principles, you will see that the way they are written, they start at the individual level and move into a larger collective reality. So you start with the inherent worth and dignity of every being, and end with the interdependent web of all existence. Rebecca Parker's theology works as if they are written in the opposite order. So that we start with the reality of the interdependent web, and the way we live as religious and ethical beings in that web is defined by the rest of the principles. That asks us to take a dramatically wider view of the world and to reconceptualize how we understand love.

Love is not a private emotion. Love is not primarily an individual experience. Love is not a sentiment or a feeling. Love is an action. Love happens when you are so aware of how intimately you are connected to a beautiful sunset and a family struggling to stay in their home that you are fundamentally changed and you can no longer live as you did before because you know that we are one. The reality of our oneness means we are called to act as if it is true.

Parker is asking us as progressive religious people to intentionally and consciously develop and live a worldview that is radically grounded in reverence. To use more traditionally theological language, God is in everything, God moves through everything and is made real in everything. And this isn't just a private reality, it is a public reality that involves politics, nation, and world. We are called to embody what she calls a holy regard, to use her words, "A persistent care that enables revolutionary new understanding. The presence of such studious and grounded care can transform the world. Our task now is to do what we can to advance reverence for life and deepen the promise of love. Let us dedicate ourselves to the thinking, researching, practice, and learning that will bring more love into the world."

Last year, the Committee on Ministry conducted a survey just like we are doing now, and the area of congregational ministry that people expressed the most frustration about was our level of commitment to social justice. There are many of you who



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feel that we are not doing enough, we're not living love first. Yes, we give half our collection away every Sunday, but is money enough. And yes, we gave to Doctors Without Borders for Haiti, which is also great, but that's love after the roof caves in. And yes, we have a wheelbarrow for food for homeless shelters, which is also good, but what is that doing about the causes of hunger. And even for all the good work we did on our volunteer trip to New Orleans, can you see how we were just a little bit like Ty Pennington? There is a feeling here that we're not putting love first as fully as we should. My question to you is this, is there one thing we can do that is more than love after the roof falls in. Just one thing that becomes our thing that makes our commitment to love first real in this world?

Next week, the Focusing the Beacon task force is holding a conversation about where we want to go and part of that conversation is about justice and outreach. And I'm going to challenge you all here. If this just becomes one more conversation about what we would like to see, and that's where it stays, nothing has changed. The hunger is in you, I know it is. What are you going to do about it?

To use the words of Rebecca Parker, "This is an audacious task for a small movement of progressive people of faith, but to paraphrase Thomas Starr King, we may be small, but when we are mad we weigh a ton. The weight of our passionate caring can help turn the world around."

May it be so.