

“Committed to Love Amidst Paradox”  
39th Citywide Interfaith Thanksgiving Service  
Reverend Dr. Ophelia Garmon-Brown,  
Rabbi Judy Schindler and Reverend Christy Snow

**Chant: Seek yourself in me, seek me in yourself**

**Judy:** We love this interfaith gathering. We all come together from varied backgrounds and faiths. In a world of chaos, we are committed to creating order. In a world of hurt, we are committed to heal. In a world where hate, at times, exists, we are committed to love. We are committed to love amidst paradox.

A paradox is either a contradictory statement – “less is more” or “you save money by spending it” or a paradox is a notion that is contrary to expectations.

Tonight my sisters and I ponder five paradoxes which hold us together. Collectively we are a spectacular coat of many colors of faith -- just look at our clergy’s vibrant vestments. The fabric of our faith community will be even more stunning and strong if we respond to the call to embrace these five powerful paradoxes.

Paradox #1 - We are called to seek God even when God is hidden and hard to find.

Paradox #2 - We are called to love others even when imperfections create barriers between us.

Paradox #3 - We are called love the stranger even when they seem foreign and our differences seem unbridgeable.

Paradox #4 - We are called to cherish the earth and all its inhabitants even when its soil is unyielding and storms disturb our life’s course.

And paradox #5 - We are called to love ourselves, even when our faults and blemishes make us feel unlovable.

At this time of Thanksgiving, our first act as a faith community is to embrace paradox #1 – to love God even in an imperfect world.

Now imagine if there were an eHarmony website helping each of us to find the ideal Divine partner for our faith. Our personal eHarmony ad for finding that perfect Divine companion might read like this: “Looking for the perfect partner to whom I can focus my prayers and in whom I can ground my values. Looking for a partner to provide healing when I am sick, to lift me up when I have fallen, to give me direction when I am lost, to be present when I am lonely, to make me whole when my world seems broken.”

We know that if this eHarmony ad were written for a human partner that no person could possibly fit the bill. Maintaining sacred relationships is not only about finding the right partner it is about being the right partner.

**Christy:** As a Religious Science minister I learned from our founder Ernest Holmes, that you do not get what you want, you get what you are. Therefore to be a partner with God I must be the partner I wish to have, which means keeping my thoughts, my actions and my intentions in the direction that I want to go personally and as part of the greater whole. I refuse to be the partner that nags and says “why aren’t you taking care of this for me?” and instead I commit to being the love I wish to see...the change I wish to see.

I am encouraged by the story of Nehemiah rebuilding the wall of Jerusalem. On four different occasions while he was working, those who meant to harm him and end his work, sent messages asking him to stop and meet with them. Staying true to his commitment to God, he consistently replied; “I’m doing a great work and I will not come down.” There is power in making the decision that no matter the distraction; I will not come down from the higher ground of my commitment to being a partner to God.

Sometimes it can be a challenge to find God in our imperfect world, until we see that there is indeed perfection within the seeming imperfection. My Father’s death 10 years ago did not feel like God working for my good, I was devastated and yet through the synchronicities and the Divine unfolding that followed, my life took a drastic turn and I became a minister, something I did not see coming I assure you. Trusting that there is one Omnipresent, Omnipotent and Omniscient Source back of all life and that this power, that I call God, is always working for my good is how I find God in what seems at times to be an imperfect world.

**Ophelia:** The second paradox we are called to embrace is to love others even when imperfections create barriers.

My grandchildren absolutely love the movie "Frozen" - - and if the truth be told, so do I! Two of the main characters are little princesses, one of whom has a major imperfection. In trying to protect her, her father told her not to reveal it, not to own it, not to feel it. Constantly trying to hide her imperfection, she lives filled with fear.

One day after the princess accidentally hurts her younger sister, their father, the king, takes her to a wisdom healer in a far off land. The sage looks intently at her and says in a sigh of relief, "It is her head that can easily be fixed -- but the heart is not so easily changed. Only an act of true love can thaw a frozen heart."

It is no different for us. We live in a culture where hiding imperfections is commonplace. We change masks so often that it is difficult to remember which face we presently are wearing. Too often we simply do not realize that there is someone who loves us despite our imperfections. Having experienced this wonderful truth in ourselves, let us then make the commitment to be that someone in the lives of each other. In the words of Sam Keen, "We come to love not by finding a perfect person, but by learning to see an imperfect person perfectly." O that we would just truly love ourselves and each other, imperfections and all!

It can be rather easy to love someone that we know - - even with their imperfections. But what about the stranger, our third paradox. Loving that other person whose human differences marginalize, whose socio-economic differences seem unbridgeable, whose political belief and

philosophy tends to alienate? Even so, love challenges every one of us to see these situations and circumstances as grace-filled opportunity to engage in honest dialogue and authentic welcome. Love permits nothing less.

Both Deuteronomy 6:5 and Luke 10:27 teach about love in action. In Luke a lawyer stands up to test Jesus asking him the question, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?"

Jesus draws from this lawyer a teaching he has heard from his youth, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself". But the story does not end here. Jesus continues with the familiar story of The Good Samaritan.

There is a man, robbed and beaten, lying on the side of the road. As he lies there a couple of people - - people like us in here, praying folks, upstanding citizens - - pass him by. Can you not see that happening still today? How many times have we passed somebody on the side of the road with their car obviously broken down but because of selfishness or fear, we keep on going? Like it or not, that person on the side of the road is our sister or our brother. And we must ask ourselves in these and in similar situations, "What does love require of us?"

The story ends by sharing that there is a man moved with pity that stops, cleans the man's wounds, takes him to shelter, and pays for his care. Interestingly enough this man is not a rich man in society, nor is he a doctor, or lawyer. His example challenges us to put love into action, when it is convenient and when it is inconvenient.

Sometimes it seems that those on the margins of life feel so much like outsiders in our culture that it frees them to care for the stranger. Notice how our homeless brothers and sisters tend to care for each other on the streets and in the shelters more than we care for one another in our neighborhoods? For them, love knows no barrier. Would that we follow their example.

I am a part of an incredible group of spiritual seekers that come from around the world meeting in New Mexico twice a year. We have three master teachers and the focus is on non-dual consciousness - - helping us to not think from the perspective of dualism: left/right, black/white, Republican/Democrat, up/down, but meeting somewhere near the middle. During my visit in September for one of our meditations we sang a chant: "**Seek yourself in me; seek me in yourself.**" (Ophelia, Christy and Judy – 2x). We sang those words over and over and over. We will have to act on these words if we are committed to loving amidst paradox.

Marianne Williamson in "A Course in Miracles" reminds us, "When you meet anyone, remember it is a holy encounter. As you see him you will see yourself. As you treat him you will treat yourself. As you think of him you will think of yourself. Never forget this for in him you will find yourself or lose yourself." This holy encounter is the Divine Presence within. Terminology is not important – you may choose to think of this presence as Christ, Yahweh, Pure Love, Buddha, Evolutionary Process, Your Highest Potential– what is important is that we see the innocence and perfection of one we are called to love. That we open our heart automatically to another with neither judgment, nor categorization, nor negativity. During Thanksgiving and

everyday we must seek ourselves in others as they seek themselves in us. Love always finds a way!

**Judy:** A Muslim story highlights the paradox of loving another. One afternoon, Nasruddin and his friend were sitting in a cafe, drinking tea, and talking about life and love.

“How come you never got married, Nasruddin?” asked his friend.

“Well,” said Nasruddin, “to tell you the truth, I spent my youth looking for the perfect woman. In Cairo, I met a beautiful, intelligent woman, with eyes like dark olives, but she was unkind. Then in Baghdad, I met a woman who was a wonderful and generous, but we had no interests in common. One woman after another would seem just right, but there was always something missing. Then one day, I met her. She was beautiful, intelligent, generous and kind. We had everything in common. In fact she was perfect.”

“What happened?” Nasruddin’s friend asked, “Why didn’t you marry her?”

Nasruddin replied, “It’s a sad thing. Seems she was looking for the perfect man.”

Seeking perfection in others and being intolerant of their imperfections will lead us to an existential aloneness. Finding faithful friends, finding good colleagues, sustaining solid family relationships, creating community with strangers and neighbors alike is in large part in our own hands. We can spend our days frustrated by the differences or flaws of others or we can work to celebrate our commonalities and their strengths. It is our reaching out in a positive relationship that will move us toward the healing and wholeness we seek.

A Jewish tale is told of two men who were fighting over a piece of land. Each claimed ownership. To resolve their argument they went to the Rabbi. The sage listened but could not determine whose case was more just. Finally he said, “Since I cannot decide to whom this land belongs, let us ask the land.” He put his ear to the ground and, after a moment, straightened up. “Gentlemen, the land says it belongs to neither of you but that you belong to it.”

This tale teaches us to embrace paradox #4. It is not only God and people we must love but the land itself and all its living beings. Thanksgiving is our harvest festival. Our gratitude for the earth and its fruits are the roots of this sacred time.

**Christy:** The Native American path and the Sufi path are two additional pieces of my Spiritual journey. In Native tradition the earth is seen as a living breathing organism and respected and loved as much as a Mother. In the Sufi faith tradition we see the Beloved in the eyes of every stranger as well as all of creation. The respect for life to a Sufi is so deeply instilled that at night when retiring for bed we lay our shoes to rest, thankful for the support they provided that day.

Being committed to loving the earth and all living things is paying attention to what causes pain and choosing not to do harm. We have to wake up and take ourselves off of autopilot and realize that the choices we make today impact the earth, our children and all living beings for generations to come.

Being committed to seeing everyone as belonging is living life with a song in your heart. A specific song that was written by a dear friend named Karen Drucker, which says; You are the face of God, I hold you in my heart, you are a part of me, you are the face of God.

The bible tells us that “God looked over all he had made, and he saw that it was very good!” Everything and everyone is a gift from our creator and we are given an opportunity in every moment of every day to honor God by honoring, respecting, loving and caring for all of creation. To honor God’s creation is to honor God.

**Judy:** And the final paradox, upon which all the others rest, is loving ourselves. Truth be told, while we are hard on others, we are hardest on ourselves. More sleepless hours are likely spent, reviewing our days and admonishing ourselves for the inadvertent words and acts done that have caused hurt.

Rachel Naomi Remen writes: The word “human being” is more a verb than a noun. Each of us is unfinished, a work in progress. Perhaps it would be most accurate to add the word “yet” to all our assessments of ourselves and each other... If life is process, all judgments are provisional, we can't judge something until it is finished.”

On this Thanksgiving night, let us say: I am not thankful enough... yet. I am not giving enough... yet. I am not loving enough... yet.

Jewish legend teaches that God gave us bread rather than wheat so we could be partners in completing creation. God gave us imperfection so that we could be partners in perfecting ourselves and our world. That is the paradox. When love is hard is when love is needed most.

**Christy:** I was once told that there is no such thing as self-love and that love had to be experienced by receiving it from someone else who was closer to God. For a moment I believed this and I separated God’s love from self-love and the affect on my life was very painful. Then I realized that in loving myself, I am loving God, because God made me and is in all of creation. I no longer believe another person’s truth for me. I now believe as Dr. Ernest Holmes says that our intuition is Spirit moving through us. Therefore, I can trust my decisions and myself and know that decisions born from authenticity and love are God inspired. No one but you can possibly know what is right for you. No one but you can hear the still small voice that is God speaking in a way, which is unique and perfect for you. Then you have to be willing and courageous enough to listen and to act and the ability to do that comes from loving and accepting yourself as well as loving and trusting God. Otherwise you dismiss it and in a sense tell God; “No thanks, I don’t need your advice, I’m busy.” Let’s stop glorifying busy! I love the quote that says “I am ready to underwhelm my schedule so that God can overwhelm my soul.”

I encourage you to love yourself through being in communion with God. I do this through prayer, meditation, music and nature along with releasing the old beliefs I had about myself that were limiting, self-defeating and definitely unloving. Someone else’s idea of me is theirs and they can have it. What I choose to believe about myself and the type of person I am committed to being, is my responsibility. I invite you to be committed to loving yourself amidst paradox, to be

your unique, authentic and loving self that only you can be. Loving God and loving yourself allows you to love the world. You may be the only proof of a loving God in someone's life today, so let your love touch the world.

**Ophelia:** Looking out at the congregation gathered this evening, we really do form a beautiful mosaic of backgrounds, a rich tapestry of faith traditions. No matter paradoxes that work to divide, no matter the differences that seem to separate, we are one community. As people of good will, we clearly see that there is much for us to do in order to accomplish unity in our diversity. Therefore, let us joyfully - - with sincerity and determination - - embrace the important work that is before us. Filled with faith and hope, we dare to live and love as the sacred writings of our faith traditions challenge us. We journey together, praying for each other as we walk together in love, so that our commitment to love amidst paradox will be bold and generous.

**Chant: Seek yourself in me, seek me in yourself (Ophelia, Christy and Judy and congregation)**