

# Love and the Tree of Life

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Rev. Dr. Mark Belletini

## Greeting, Centering, Kindling, Opening:

We are here,  
as winter finally pays a cold, snowy visit,  
to worship, to remind ourselves that  
we're fragile, small leaves on the tree of life,  
neither branch or trunk, nor wisp of root,  
teaching us that humility and gratitude  
are deep taproots of our love.

**And so, without guarantees, we lean into joy, and bend toward a just way of life, both for our own sakes, and for the sake of our children and all beings with whom we share the earth. We would engage our mission wholeheartedly, with courage, self-questioning, compassion, vulnerability and honesty.**

## Teacher Thanksgiving

### Sequence

O Love, here I am, at this moment, on this planet, in this place, utterly in awe that I am alive, and that everything is. In awe because I know I *would not be here at all* except for what has been revealed in a grand and sacred text written in strata, stars and grateful observation:

That I am here proclaims the tale of billions of years of gathering stardust, solar birth, gravity and other forces scooping the dust into the solid orb on which I stand, thunder and lightning and boiling seas for countless years, lava, proteins, cells, unnamed early blobs of what we now call life, a billion, billion trilobites in warm seas, soft mollusks in their spiral shells, bony fish, and a hundred million years of shiny amphibians, centipedes the size of my body, ferns and trees that no longer exist; a hundred million years of great reptiles, feathered creatures morphing into birds; great sloths and woolly mammoths and wide-eyed lemurs grabbing onto branches with almost human-like hands; early humans gathering around waterholes on the African veld; pyramids and reed boats, star-watching and calendar-making, the vain smoke of sacrifices, the groan of chants curling into songs, the taming of horses and dogs, the refinements of cruelty and their antidote, empathy; the mutation of genes and chromosomes, the cry of language, the prophets, farmers, seafarers and laborers in stone and wood; the discovery and ritualization of alcohol; the struggles and wonders of genders, sexualities and spiritualities; war, peace, famine, greed, critique, abundance, loss and love. And all of these things together lead to this moment, and to me and you, fragile leaves on the tree of life who are now keeping proper silence before this wonder.

*Silence*

Here and now blend with past and future, as our lives blend with others in our hearts. Here and now, we can bless this reality by naming in our hearts, or whispered aloud, all those whom we love, find hard to love, miss terribly, or remember with gratitude.

*naming*

The golden blossoms on the tree of life open now, as the transforming wonder that is music blesses our hearts.

## **Music**

**The First Reading** *is a poem by Dorianne Laux, whom Steve Abbott introduced me to this week. He will read the piece, called The Life of Trees written in 2007.*

The pines rub their great noise  
into the spangled dark, scratch  
their itchy boughs against the house,  
that moan's mystery translates roughly  
into drudgery of ownership: time  
to drag the ladder from the shed,  
climb onto the roof with a saw  
between my teeth, cut  
those suckers down. What's reality  
if not a long exhaustive cringe  
from the blade, the teeth. I want to sleep  
and dream the life of trees, beings  
from the muted world who care  
nothing for Money, Politics, Power,  
Will or Right, who want little from the night  
but a few dead stars going dim, a white owl  
lifting from their limbs, who want only  
to sink their roots into the wet ground  
and terrify the worms or shake  
their bleary heads like fashion models  
or old hippies. If trees could speak,  
they wouldn't, only hum some low  
green note, roll their pinecones  
down the empty streets and blame it,  
with a shrug, on the cold wind.  
During the day they sleep inside  
their furry bark, clouds shredding  
like ancient lace above their crowns.  
Sun. Rain. Snow. Wind. They fear  
nothing but the Hurricane, and Fire,  
that whipped bully who rises up  
and becomes his own dead father.

In the storms the young ones  
bend and bend and the old know  
they may not make it, go down  
with the power lines sparking,  
broken at the trunk. They fling  
their branches, forked sacrifice  
to the beaten earth. They do not pray.  
If they make a sound it's eaten  
by the wind. And though the stars  
return they do not offer thanks, only  
ooze a sticky sap from their roundish  
concentric wounds, clap the water  
from their needles, straighten their spines  
and breathe, and breathe again.

**The Second Reading** is from the Scroll of 'Yob or Job in the Tanakh, the Hebrew scripture. It was both written and compiled by anonymous authors between the fourth and sixth centuries before the beginning of our era. The Hebrew is the most difficult to translate in all the Tanakh, and its one of the rare poems from ancient times that is both sarcastically humorous and richly philosophical at once.

Why do you confuse the issue? Why do you talk without knowing what you are talking about? Pull yourself together, Job. Get up on your feet. Stand tall. I have some questions for you and I want some straight answers. Where were you when the foundations of the earth were being set down? You know so much. Tell me what you know! What influences contributed to the earth's size? Do you think there were blueprints? Measuring tools? Do you have the original plumb line? Did you help pour the stone? Maybe it was you personally who set the cornerstone, while all the morning stars brimming the sky were singing for joy? Did anyone you know take charge of the first waters when they gushed like a newborn from the womb? Did you build a playpen for the waters, saying: "Stay here, this is your place. Your wild tantrums are confined to this seabed?"

## Sermon

This last summer I went to see a film by Terrence Malick. I went with high expectations because of my haunting and vivid memory of seeing his film *Days of Heaven* more than 30 years ago. The cinematography was so over-the top beautiful, I remember people actually gasping out loud in the theater.

The story itself was not the point of *Days of Heaven*. It was simply a retelling of the rather sordid biblical story about Abraham making a small fortune off the King of Egypt by loaning his wife to him, a sexist romp if there ever was one. But the film's sheer beauty overcame even the tawdriness of the tale.

Many people who went to see the movie "*Tree of Life*," however, were *not* grabbed by the beauty of the film. (And it indeed was beautiful as I expected.) They just walked out of it. Many more,

who stayed to the end because of Malick's reputation, walked out during the credits, shaking their heads and saying aloud "Really? *Really?*"

I admit it. The film *was* long. And though the beauty of the cinematography was sumptuous, the story in the film was way more moving than the one in *Days of Heaven*. It portrays a Waco, Texas family in the 1950s. Father, mother, three boys. One of the boys dies, although all you see is the grief, the movie's impressionistic style never tells you who or how. That's odd enough. But the film also shows, and I am not making this up, everything that ever was, beginning with the fabled "big bang" that exploded into what we now call the universe. Malick shows us the formation of the stars and solar systems out of Hubble-revealed dust clouds, the whole development of earth through ages of lava and steam, the evolution of life...one celled creatures, fish and ferns and trilobites and dinosaurs (they were hadrosaurs, I think) and even a surreal image of a beautiful beach ending to everything far away in the future.

In other words, Malick sets a limited, particular moment in time, with singular people living singular moments, right smack in the middle of the unlimited, impossibly majestic flow of creation from beginning to the end. Or imagine what he did as something like a small jewel on ten acres of black velvet. The film reminds us that we are but very small leaves on an infinite tree of life, with a million branches we know almost nothing about.

Tree of life. Lovely phrase. The stuff of world theology apparently. Ygdrassil, the Norse Tree of Life. The *Etz Ha Hayim* of the Kaballistic Jews. The Chinese, Assyrians, Egyptians all had a tree of life symbol. The Bahai's speak of it, and Christians of all kinds lift up the tree of life with healing leaves found in the Book of Revelation. Well, I too use *tree of life* as a theological symbol. The one used by Charles Darwin to describe evolution, which well symbolizes my own theology. And this morning, after a wild week of loud political pundits (I'm being charitable here) flinging *their* theology into just about everything...contraception, same-sex marriage, economics, ecological concerns, I think it's probably time I lay out my own theology, even if only serves to keep the strangeness of present public theological discourse from doing me in.

So, this morning, I'm here to talk about love. More precisely, I'm here to talk about the profound theological connection I personally make between evolution's tree of life and the reality of love which I experience. I'm here to talk about what I think about several times each day...honestly!... as I do what I do in my ordinary life... write sermons, call folks on the phone, visit people in duress, mourn alongside those who mourn, answer email, write letters, mentor young ministers, watch films, do my laundry, wash the dishes and take my daily fistful of pills and vitamins for my heart and diabetic issues. I think about the meanings of love *every day*. I think about life and death everyday, including my own. I think about the sheer "thatness" that everything is, and that I, by comparison to the limitlessness of it all, am no more important than a single grain of sand on an infinite beach.

Now listen, I have been thinking this way all my life. There never was a time in my life when evolution was not at the center of my worldview and my theology. I was not raised to think, like so many I have met, that science and faith were eternally at odds, and that if evolution was true, then God was meaningless. I was taught about evolution from first grade on in a Catholic school. Teachers delighted us with the story of the Big Bang billions of years ago, especially because the

idea was first articulated by a Belgian priest, Abbé Lamâitre. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, a Jesuit priest, was required reading. He wrote extensively about his theological understanding of evolution. Furthermore, I was taught in a Catholic high school that both creation stories in the book of Genesis were in fact witty, sarcastic commentaries about the creation stories of the neighboring Sumerians and Canaanites, and that only sadly uneducated people actually thought there was an actual wooden tree of life in a garden someplace. Unlike many raised in different parishes, or different denominations, or different religions, I did not have "a crisis of faith" when I started going to that Universalist Church in Farmington MI in 1972. I simply went further down the path I was already walking. I know now I must have been lucky, since so many I have talked to in the last 30 years are convinced that to move *with* the ideas of evolution and not against them is to be *irreligious, anti-Christian and to toss God out the window*. Those I don't talk to are often even more clear about this. Evangelist David Stewart, for example, says that if I accept evolution as a fact I am possessed by the devil. And according to Joyce Meyer, the popular television evangelist, people like me, who have "fallen for evolution" are just plain "stupid." Now she preaches...with great charm, I freely admit... to millions each and every day. Me, on a good Sunday I preach to about 400 over the two services. Now it's true that Richard Dawkins, the articulate atheist, insists that people who *deny* evolution are not just stupid, but completely insane, so the practice of self-assured name-calling and virulent derision can be found across the playing field. I, for one, am not sure what such tactics can possibly accomplish except for a little self-aggrandizement.

If the often repeated polls - from every conceivable source - convince you as they do me, more than 50 percent of all United States Americans believe with Joyce Meyer, David Stewart and most other evangelists that I am completely wrong about my theology. They say I am not just wrong, but a real threat to their religious way of life. Over and over they have preached to me to that evolution is just my atheist belief, and that it's my poor substitute for "real" religion. And real religion, I'm told over and over again, is found only in taking the book of Genesis as a science text. And so it goes further for many: even though Genesis in no way talks about prescriptions for contraception, passages from that misunderstood collection of Bedouin legends are being used to club our President's head to try and demolish *his* take on contraception; and of course the famous and entirely distorted understanding of the Sodom story is being hurled around by those who have banned teachers from using the word "Gay" in history classes in Tennessee schools, as well as by who want to get the judges of California's 9th Court of Appeals tossed off their benches, and the governor of Washington State tossed out of her gubernatorial office...all for thinking that it's reasonable that same-gender folks can marry.

As far as I am concerned, no one gets to lecture me on "true religion." Years ago I made a firm commitment to never allow *anyone* to tell me I am irreligious, or worse, a "non-believer," if I don't accept *their* understanding about religion. I don't let anyone else define my life for me, my theology for me, my secularity for me, my commitments or my love. I and I alone have that privilege, burden and holy responsibility. I am very clear about that. I hope you are clear about that in your own lives.

This afternoon we are sponsoring an interfaith ceremony where people who have been together in committed relationships, either legally or without the blessing of the state, can be treated equally as they "renew their vows of love and commitment." The State of Ohio may not like it

that I think these are relationships of equal spiritual dignity, but then, the state of Ohio, like any state, or any country in the world for that matter, has only been involved with marriage for far less than two hundred years. Before that, marriage was blessed by a justice of the peace, or clergy, but there were no records in any city bureau. But even that tradition of clergy solemnizing marriage only began in the 13 hundreds...before that, marriage was only about clan and family arrangements. No state-ordered certificates, no special privileges except for anyone. When King Louis left his riches to Eleanor of Aquitaine in the 11 hundreds, he had to draw up papers no different from Leonardo Da Vinci when he left his estate to his partner Francesco Melzi in the fifteen hundreds. No one had "wedding licenses" in those days. Marriage by state law, with documents kept in state offices, I am telling you, is a relatively recent invention in the history of the world. Actual marriage you see, is mostly, and I mean mostly, not about certificates. It's about love. Let me say more.

I accept love as the ground of partnership because the great insights of evolution remind me that I am an animal, a mammal among mammals, and that there nothing to be ashamed about there. Evolutionary scientists have observed that many species, especially Homo Sapiens, have over the course of millions of years come to feel more and more empathy. This empathy is in our biological makeup. The practices we call love evolved in human beings *from that empathy*, especially, evolutionists remind us, the bonding of mother for child. And love, as Phyllis Rose defines so well, is "the momentary or prolonged refusal to think of another person in terms of power." Steven Levine boldly adds: "It's the *only* rational act of lifetime." Yes, rational, because love is *not* a feeling (that is, a reaction to stimuli), but a *decision*, yes, usually based *on*, or invited *by*, a feeling, the feeling we call "falling in love," it's a very human thing to do. But the feeling "being in love," at the initial intensity, does not seem to last for a long time. But love itself can eventually deepen enough to survive great difficulties. If my son does something that drives me crazy, my love for him is not diminished in any way. Oh, yeah, love CAN end, sure. I've lost love several times. But my capacity to love never seems to diminish, and mostly my love thrives, not ends.

Remember, I didn't grow up with this foolishness about some absolute conflict between religion and science. And though some may not believe this, evolution can make as much perfectly good sense to those who use God language as well as to those who don't. The present Pope, with whom I share no important theological language, certainly...and I think we can agree here... uses God language to express his spirituality; yet he also clearly accepts evolution as the best description of the way things are. He believes that God got the universe going, but does not imagine that God micromanages the death of species. Evolution works as a process, not a design. The natural world, Dorianne Laux reminds us in her poem, *The Life of Trees*, is not conscious in any way that would make sense to us, the thinking mammals, many of whom, like me, count themselves religious. *They do not pray*, she reminds us. *And though the stars return, they do not offer thanks, only ooze a sticky sap from their roundish concentric wounds...straighten their spines and breathe, and breathe again.*

The trees "breathe," but not very much like we do. They do not give thanks. They do not love. And the stars that explode into supernovas and destroy the planets around them like soap bubbles in a furnace do not feel empathy for them. The abyss of space has no feelings, no love. Those possibilities have evolved mostly in the human brain.

Now I well realize that sex and love are not the same thing...same-sex copulation and different-sex copulation occur throughout nature, in tens of thousands of species; but only humans, as far as we know, try *to fuse* these two great inheritances from evolution's vast centuries, sex and love, into one relationship. Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't, as we all know,

But listen, the fact that the universe is not tender does not make me resist my own tenderness, or worse, make me dismiss it as "mere biology." Biology is not "mere"...it's awesome and glorious and wondrous. The book of Job, with its amazing poetry, reminds us that awe and wonder about creation are the basic foundations for any theology worth a damn. *"Where were you when the foundations of the earth were being set down? You know so much. Tell me what you know! What influences contributed to the earth's size? Do you think there were blueprints? Measuring tools? Do you have the original plumb line? Did you help pour the stone?"*

The book of Job is rather agnostic; it's not in anyway a lecture about being faithful to God no matter how many children die. No, the book of Job insists that we don't have answers to everything, and never will. The universe is too vast and we are too small. It reminds us that it's love which is central, the *most rational thing* we do, and not figuring out some meaningful reason why babies die. Love is central even though floods wash children away, famine kills, and certain groups of people hurt and harass other groups of people for so-called biblical reasons. This is the very point Malick was making by quoting the book of Job at the beginning of his film...one of the passages you heard this morning, actually...and portraying the story of a family suffering the awful loss of a child in the context of the whole panorama of evolution, where whole species die out with regularity. Stop thinking the universe is about you and your concerns, evolution tells me, quite religiously. The suffering you feel is not a punishment, or something you earned...it's just part of the whole astonishing parade of evolution as are you. You however, very small parts of that evolution, have the power to love, to treat others not from a place of privileged power, but with recognition and empathy. With Love. That evolved within you over a billion years. And maybe I'll have to agree that Love *is* God, as Gandhi once said. Maybe that, in the end, is the best summary of my evolutionary theology. At least, it grounds my life as I move through a world that distinguishes itself from me... and most UU's I know, theologically.

## **Offering**

### **Alleluia and Gradual for the Tree of Life**

Take a step. Go deeper. Find the alleluia hidden in your every day life, the trip to the store, the laundry, the oil change, the dishes, the shopping. The alleluia is this: you are alive, you are able to do these things, you are doing these things at the center of an infinite line stretching toward the unseen origins of all things, and unseen fate of all things. You are the only you there is or ever will be. Glory, Glory Hallelujah.

Take another step, go deeper. Find the alleluia in your struggles and uncertainties. They are your honesty, the sign of your humility and redeeming truthfulness. They are a life-saving alleluia. Glory, Glory, Hallelujah.

Take another step, go deeper. You can do it. Step on the ground. It will hold you. The ground

that you have no final words for, the ground that is solid even though its meanings shift. Lay your burdens down now. Stop carrying them. You are you, not Atlas. Set the world down. I assure you, the fire breathing dragons don't live here anymore. You are safe. You are free. You can dance without embarrassment. The sap that keeps the tree of life alive keeps you alive, lending you glory, lending you alleluia. Glory, glory, alleluia!