Ubuntu
March 14, 2021
Rev Arthur Lavoie

Call to Worship
I am not from east or west
not up from the ground
or out of the ocean
my place is placeless
a trace of the traceless
I belong to the beloved  Rumi

Sermon
Eboo Patel is an American Muslim whose family is originally from India. He was raised in the U.S., absorbing American culture, language, customs and values. He sometimes struggles with the different identities that he has to live with.

In his book, Acts of Faith, he tells a story about visiting his grandmother in India. He didn’t spend much time with her growing up since their only contacts were her infrequent visits to the U.S. As a young American kid he saw her as foreign with her different culture and devout Muslim practice that was a contrast to his more secular American experience.

“I woke up one morning,” he writes, “to find a new woman in the apartment. She looked a little scared and disheveled, and she was wearing a torn white nightgown several sizes too big for her, probably one of my grandmother’s old outfits. . .

‘Who is she?’ I asked my grandmother.

‘I don’t know her real name. The leader of the prayer house brought her here. She is getting abused by her father and uncle. We will take care of her until we can find somewhere safe to send her. We will call her Anisa.’

‘Mama, what if these crazy men, this father and uncle, come looking for her? Do you think it’s safe to keep this woman here?’

My grandmother looked at me a bit suspiciously . . . ‘We will check the door before we answer it. And God is with us’ she said.

‘Mama this is crazy. You can’t just take strange women into your home and keep them here for weeks or months. This isn’t the Underground Railroad, you know. You’re old now. This is dangerous.’

‘Crazy, huh?’ she responded. ‘How old are you?’
‘Twenty-two,’ he replied.
'I have been doing this for forty-five years. That’s more than twice as long as you’ve been on earth. This may be the fiftieth, sixtieth, hundredth person who has come here and been safe. They call me Ashraf Ma-ji.'

She got up and walked slowly over to the cabinet and took down a box. She lifted the lid, and I looked inside and saw a mess of Polaroids. 'I took pictures of them.' She reached into the box and picked up a picture. 'This one was so pretty. Her father was an alcoholic. Her mother died in a car accident. She was afraid that he would sell her into prostitution for money to drink. We sent her to school to improve her sewing, and we found her a good husband. She has two children and started a very successful sewing business.'

My grandmother started going through the other Polaroids. There was a poor woman with three young sons from the south of India who had heard about my grandmother and come for help. A woman from Calcutta who could neither hear nor speak and whose parents had abandoned her. Several girls whose fathers were sexually and physically abusive. My grandmother helped them find jobs or husbands, sent them back to school, or helped them locate family members in other parts of India. She had made little notes on the back of each Polaroid: name, birthday, current address. The more stories she told about the people she had saved, the more I realized how little I know about my grandmother.

'Why do you do this?' I finally blurted out.

She looked a little shocked that I would ask, as if to say that the answer was self-evident. But just in case it wasn’t clear to me, she said simply, 'I am a Muslim. This is what Muslims do.'    Eboo Patel, “Acts of Faith”

Sometime later when Patel was studying for his doctorate at Oxford in England, he met a Muslim scholar there who knew of his grandmother. Ashraf Ma-ji as they called her was well known and revered globally for her work saving women.

Bishop Desmond Tutu, the Anglican Bishop from South Africa spent many years of his ministry as a critic of the apartheid system. Yet he also had a major role in crafting the “truth and reconciliation commission” that helped bring the country together after the dismantling of apartheid. Tutu’s view of humanity, his theology of human nature, is developed from the African word, Ubuntu.

“Tutu is from the Xhosa people, and his sense of ubuntu derives from the Xhosa expression, ubuntu ungamntu ngabanye abantu, which roughly translated means ‘each individual’s humanity is ideally expressed in relationship with others’ or ‘a person depends on other people to be a person.’”    Michael Battle, Reconciliation, The Ubuntu Theology of Desmond Tutu, p 39
In Desmond Tutu’s theology of *Ubuntu* there are no substantial differences between us. We are all made from the same substance. And the categories of tribe, race, class, age, sexual orientation, gender identity, ability; all of these have little real meaning if we are truly one. If we all come from this same source, then we are all united, all one, and our well-being is not an individual pursuit but depends on the whole. It is only in this connection with each other, only in community that we can be fully human.

This *Ubuntu* theology can be a radical shift for us and can stand against some of the ways we in the western world have organized our thinking. We often see the individual having the highest value, as standing apart from the community. We applaud individual initiative. My personhood is often defined through by what I possess or the value of what I produce and truth is found in my own thinking, my own rational capacities. Self-actualization is one of our greatest values. Our interest can be very self-focused and self-centered. I am looking out for my own good. The good of the whole community, the whole of humanity, the whole of creation, is perhaps only of interest when I have taken care of myself.

Tutu writes: “A self-sufficient human being is subhuman. I have gifts that you do not have, so, consequently, I am unique—you have gifts that I do not have, so you are unique. God has made us so that we will need each other. We are made for a delicate network of interdependence.”  


*Ubuntu* and our Universalist theology remind us that life is abundant, is filled with blessing, that each of us has must have access to all of the goodness of life. We diminish that blessing when we hoard it and blessing grows exponentially when we give it away.

When I was growing up my maternal grandfather was a key figure in the local Portuguese community. He had been in the U.S. for many years, owned a successful business and had gotten to know all of the local politicians and civic leaders. When someone needed help of any kind, they would come to my grandfather. Sometimes they needed a loan or a job, or an apartment to rent for family members who were about to immigrate. Sometimes they had gotten in trouble for not knowing how things worked here. Back in the small villages in Portugal, when you wanted to open a shop, for example, you just got some merchandise and hung out your sign. Here there were permits and inspections and all kinds of hoops to go through. So, my grandfather would help. He would know where to turn, who to go to.

Many called him “patrinho,” the Portuguese word for godfather. We all thought that was hysterical because the “Godfather” books and movies were coming out. But his role in that community embodied the most positive aspects of what the word “godfather” could mean.
I remember once asking him why he did this, why he helped so many people. As in the case of Eboo Patel’s grandmother, he seemed surprised by the question and said something like. “Life has been good to me. People helped me when I first came here. I do this because I can. This is what good Christians do.”

This is what good Christians, good Muslims, good people do, of any faith tradition or none. This is what it means to be a good human being. And it’s not something out of the ordinary. The question “why?” is an inappropriate question. Perhaps the better question is “How?” How will you and I live out our religious and our human values? How will we be engaged in helping others? How will we pass on the blessings we have been given? How will we sacrifice our self-centeredness and see our deep connection and responsibility and accountability to all of creation?

Here, at First Parish in Plymouth, I have found that the spirit of Ubuntu is alive and well. This community brings people together. It gives you opportunities to share your gifts and blessing and be supported by the gifts and blessings of others.

And, we need your financial support to continue to be a thriving church community. Today, we are beginning our pledge drive for the fiscal year which will begin on July 1. In order to prepare a balanced budget, we need to know what each of you thinks you might be able to give to support the ministry of this church. We know that circumstances might change and you may not be able to follow through with your pledge or you might be able to give more. Adjustments can always be made. We ask for your best estimate and the pledge brochure that you should have received in the mail can help you calculate that.

In a couple of minutes, you will be divided into groups with your pledge captain who will guide you in the process. Any of you who are visitors today or haven’t been regular pledgers will be in a group with me to talk more about what the church could mean to you.

Ubuntu, is one word that can describe your dynamic interconnectedness, our recognition that we are not alone and that all of our actions affect and depend on this interdependent web. If we act with only ourselves in mind, we tear at the fabric that binds us together. We succeed only at the success of all. We are whole, and holy, and healthy only when we all share the bounty and blessing of life.

Amen, Blessed Be