

Let's Get Real

A Sermon for Sunday Morning Worship with Communion
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT
October 1, 2017 ~~ Blessing of the Animals Sunday
Text: Luke 8:40-56

Some of you who follow me on Facebook know that I have become obsessed with the little baby Bengal tiger being hand raised by the tiger experts at the San Diego Zoo. I mean, he is just incredibly adorable. He ended up at the zoo because he was discovered being illegally trafficked into the US to be somebody's pet – a bad idea for a whole lot of reasons. When he arrived at the zoo he was only about 5 weeks old and he weighed about 7 pounds. He's now up to about 16 pounds and he is all paws. The zoo folks are posting regular updates on him and I admit I am hooked on these videos which are chronicling the life of this little cutey-pie. I keep thinking how neat it would be to hold him, play with him and then I remember, he's a real tiger. He will grow up to weigh over 400 pounds and be as much as 10 feet in length from the tip of his nose to the tip of his tail. He is as cute as kittens get, but he will not remain a kitten for long. Someday soon he will be a very real, very big, tiger.

Yet he still reminds me of the Velveteen Rabbit because the Rabbit had moments of being confused about being real too. We heard some of his questions in the pages we did read but we also see him confused in one of the parts we didn't read. It describes

an encounter between the Velveteen Rabbit and actual rabbits he meets when he is playing with the boy out in the meadow. The actual rabbits soon figure out that the Velveteen Rabbit isn't like them, and so they tease him about not being real. The Velveteen Rabbit tries to explain why he is real – because the boy loved him into being real – but they didn't care. This confused the Velveteen Rabbit because what could be more real than love.

The Velveteen Rabbit was first published in 1922. It was Margery Williams first book and went on to win several prestigious awards. There is much to love about this book and the food for thought and conversation it provides. For me, one of the most beautiful scenes in the book is the one which describes the encounter between the Skin Horse and the Velveteen Rabbit during the bunny's early days in the nursery. The Velveteen Rabbit had asked the Skin Horse a very simple question, "What is REAL?" The bunny thought it must have something to do with being a wind-up toy with works and gears inside. The Skin Horse soon sets him straight. "Real isn't how you are made," he said. "It's a thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but really loves you, then you become real." The Velveteen Rabbit asks, "does it hurt?" And the Skin Horse responds, "Sometimes [but] when you are real, you don't mind being hurt."

You don't mind being hurt. Now that is an extraordinary statement. When someone loves you for a really long time, really loves you in spite of all the reasons not to, then you become real. By this I mean, you become a whole new you in a whole new way because you have been transformed by this person's love for you. You've been changed into a whole new person that you would never have been without this person's love for you. This might sound like a radical statement, but think about it. Think about someone in your life whom you really love, someone whose love for you touches every part of your life. Got someone in mind? Okay. Now think about who you would be if this person had never been in your life. It hurts to think about that possibility, doesn't it? But, then again, as the Skin Horse said, being real does hurt sometimes. Love hurts sometimes. But when it is real, you become a more complete person, real in a whole new way, just like the Velveteen Rabbit became real through the boy's love. Love, authentic, unselfish and unconditional love, is transformative for the one who is loved and the one who loves. Love literally changes everything.

This is the dynamic at play, I think, in the story we read this morning from the Gospel of Luke. This is a pretty well-known story, probably one of the best known of the healing stories about Jesus. It's actually one healing story within another healing story and yet it is the interconnection of the two stories that makes

them so provocative. The primary story is the healing of Jairus' daughter. Jairus, we are told, was one of the leaders of the local synagogue, a fact which makes it all the more remarkable that he would come to Jesus for help since the synagogue leaders generally did not like Jesus very much. They saw him as an upstart and a trouble-maker, redefining what they thought they knew about God from the Torah. For Jairus to come to Jesus for help meant only one thing – he loved his daughter more than anything, even more than he cared about being criticized for approaching Jesus. He loved his daughter so much he was willing to risk everything on the reality of Jesus' ability to heal.

Jesus agrees to help him, with no hesitation at all and they set off for Jairus' home where the little girl was waiting. But before they could get very far, Jesus stops dead in his tracks. "Who touched me?" he asks. He was surrounded by crowds, as his disciples pointed out, so of course someone had touched him. But that wasn't a good enough answer for Jesus. "I felt power go out of me," he said, because it had. A woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for years had crawled up behind him as he passed by and touched just the hem of his robe, trusting that this would be enough for her to be healed. She had hoped no one would notice but Jesus noticed immediately and he stopped to find out what happened. She summoned all her courage, stood up and faced him to admit it was she who had touched him and that

she had immediately been healed when she did. He responded only by saying that her faith had made her well.

Worth noting here is that as a hemorrhaging woman, she would have been considered impure and by merely touching him she had technically made him impure too. But Jesus didn't care. And Jairus didn't care. The only thing that mattered, the only thing that was real at this moment was that his daughter needed Jesus' help and this woman just proved Jesus was the real deal. But, at this exact same moment of miraculous healing for someone else, someone comes to tell Jairus that his daughter has died. No need to both the master any longer. This time Jesus responds saying, "do not fear, only believe." They continued on to Jairus' house and soon enough, the little girl is coming downstairs to have something to eat. Jesus healed her, making real his promise to Jairus, making real God's love for all through his healing touch.

The lack of clarity of what's real and what isn't runs right through the center of this story about Jairus and an anonymous woman. The woman clearly believed Jesus was the real deal. She had no doubt that Jesus could heal her, even without his knowledge. Jairus, on the other hand, probably wasn't so sure but he was desperate to save his daughter. The woman was healed immediately upon touching Jesus' cloak, and Jesus merely affirmed what she already knew to be true. On the other hand,

Jairus and all the people gathered outside his home, including Jesus' own disciples, needed to be convinced that Jesus' ability to heal was so real that even death could be overcome.

What fascinates me about the story of the Velveteen Rabbit and these two healing stories is the role love plays in all three. Love is what makes the Velveteen Rabbit real, transforming a beautiful toy rabbit with sawdust stuffing into something so much more than a toy. Love from the boy made the Velveteen Rabbit real, so real in fact, that his beautiful fur and satin lined ears and thread whiskers and button eyes were loved into oblivion. The more loved he was by the boy, the less beautiful he became but the boy didn't notice or care. The rabbit himself didn't notice or care. Love transcended physical appearance, physical condition. And this was also the case with the hemorrhaging woman and Jairus' daughter. God's love for the woman made real through Jesus transcended all the rules which said this woman was unclean and therefore unworthy of love or compassion. Her disease had made her increasingly repulsive to the community in which she lived, but God's love made real through Jesus restored her to new life and new wholesomeness. She was loved real too, just like the Velveteen Rabbit but unlike the bunny, she came more beautiful as love healed her. So too with Jairus and his daughter. Love pushed Jairus way past his comfort zone to ask for help from someone he didn't understand or perhaps even respect. But he

loved his daughter so much that didn't matter. The only thing real for Jairus was his love for his daughter. And that love made all the difference. Jairus' love for her made it possible for Jesus to heal her and that act of healing transformed both Jairus and his daughter forever. Love made them real in a whole new way.

So, that's my wish for you this week. I hope you are able to discover, recover and recollect all the ways that love has made you more real. More real to the people you love and who love you. More real to all the people whose lives intersect with yours. I want you to let yourself be more real and more open to letting God's love shine through you all the time. Is this easy, letting God's love shine through you every moment of every day, transforming everything it touches? No, of course not. Real love is never easy. But, when you get discouraged with yourself or with others who don't love you as you think they should, I hope you will remember the words of the wise old Skin Horse: "When you are real, you don't mind being hurt" ... because love is the only "real" that counts. Remember too that real love that changes everything but it takes a long time. And it's worth every second. Amen.