

Love is the Main Thing
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First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)
Unitarian Universalist
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Meditation

Quieting our minds, our sometimes very busy minds...

We seek here a deeper stillness...

An inner stillness...

Stillness among us...

Stillness becoming presence...

Presence... here... now...

Presence for ourselves... presence with and for one another...

Presence becoming caring...

For one another... for all beings...

for life... for this earth we share...

Quiet... still... present... caring...

As we enter the silence together...

Readings

If I speak in the tongues of mortals and angels but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and knowledge, and if I have faith so as to remove mountains but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body to be burned, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful, it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth.

Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends. Prophecies will come to an end. Tongues will cease. Knowledge will come to an end...

Now, faith, hope, and love abide, these three, and the greatest of these is love.

--from 1 Corinthians 13

The fact that love can be said and written over such a wide range of relating – parent and child, elderly couples, teenagers, happenings at first sight, knowings over years, people gathered in community, and references to pets, jobs, hobbies, etc. – does not mean that love is poorly defined or used. Rather, the scope of love is that large and larger. Is it possible that everyone on the planet has some sense of the word? Could there be any person who does not have some inner knowing of love?

Love can be.

There is need on the planet for our restless hearts to take the risk of love on personal, institutional, national-international levels, and discover what opportunities of touch there are.

...We are all capable or reaching more than we ever expected, and our suspicious withholding styles of life are not fulfilling. When reaching is of love, it is not action which may destroy us but inaction.

To check the pulse of love in any given situation can qualify all of life.

--from *Restless is the Heart: A Perspective On Love and Violence* by Rev. Robert Kimball, former dean and president of Starr King School for the Ministry

Sermon

Alice Walker once wrote:

Love is not concerned
with whom you pray
or where you slept
the night you ran away
from home.
Love is concerned
that the beating of your heart
should kill no one.

Have you ever been told who you were permitted to love and who you were not permitted to love? We all know about Romeo and Juliet. Their feuding families were quite clear that they should not, must not love one another. Things ended badly.

Literature is filled with such stories.

But we don't need to go to literature for such stories.

Sometimes (or is it often?) entire societies make it quite clear who should not love whom – based on caste or race for example. Or gender: most of the world until recently has been quite clear – and too much of the world still is – that two men shouldn't love each other, or two women. This is changing, but not fast enough.

Love should not be concerned with “where you slept” as the poet said, or with whom you sleep. To put it another way, what matters – and it matters a lot! – is *that* you love, not what category of human being you love or are “allowed” to love.

So, not surprisingly, when previously proscribed love becomes permitted love, great joy ensues!

So while weddings are almost always joyful occasions, the most joyful of weddings at which I've had the privilege of officiating were among the dozen or so for same sex couples during the months following the affirmation of full marriage equality in Massachusetts. It was as if a dam of love had burst forth. Love as deep as anyone else's, once proscribed, was now permitted by law, and so could be celebrated in the holy commitment of marriage – sometimes after twenty or thirty years of shared life. And so – deep and wonderful joy!

There is of course still much to be done. So though during this gay and lesbian pride month we can celebrate the gains we have made, we also know that marriage equality is still not universal, and we also know that not everyone entirely understands what it means to affirm that the children of gay and lesbian couples ought to be treated with the same love and care as anyone else's children.

Because love *is* the main thing!

This said, there are, as we know and as we were reminded in the second reading, so many ways to express and experience love. Though as Bob Kimball also reminded us, just because we apply the word to such a wide range of relationships does not mean our understanding of love is vague or ill-defined; not at all – rather, it means that love is a huge reality; maybe it means that love is the sea in which we swim, if we would only wake up and notice it is that big.

Notice that love *is* the main thing – and that “to check the pulse of love in any given situation can qualify all of life.”

Paraphrasing St. Paul: You can have all sorts of powers and abilities, you can accomplish great things in life, yet if your life is bereft of love, there will be an emptiness.

Now, notice this. Paul did not compose his words for a wedding ceremony, even though this is perhaps their most frequent use these days. No, he was writing a letter to a particular community, a community of new Christians (well, all Christians were new Christians back then!) who were trying to figure out how to *be* Christians, and weren't doing an altogether good job of it. Near the beginning of Paul's letter he is explicit: “...it has been reported to me... that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters.”

Paul proceeds to outline the various differences of opinion dividing the Corinthian Christian community, and then concludes with the stunning passage we heard earlier, and which most of us have heard or read many times.

As I said, these words are often read at weddings; but probably they should more often be read at the beginning of meetings – church meetings in particular! For Paul is telling us that as we do the work of living in community... whatever other skills and talents we may have, the greatest gift of all, and it is a gift we *all* have and can nurture, is love.

Love *is* the main thing.

We certainly do try to nurture love here at Old Ship in our hearts and in our lives. When we light our candles of joy and sorrow, we are nurturing love. When we greet our neighbors in the pews, whether they are old friends or new visitors, we are nurturing love. When we pray for those near or far, we are nurturing love, the love in our hearts and in our lives.

A few weeks ago we voted at our annual meeting to approve the initial goal proposed by our Strategic Planning Committee, a goal to be more warmly welcoming – radically hospitable we might say, as I put it in a sermon last September – welcoming, deeply hospitable, in short

loving to everyone as we also strive to create a sense of belonging for everyone at Old Ship, newcomers or oldtimers. Belonging.

Each of us knowing we are loved. Here.

Is this about marketing? About increasing our membership numbers? Well, I would hope that the more loving we became, the more attractive a community we would become – everyone would want to be here!

But we should understand the challenge to be more welcoming, more warmly loving, not as marketing ploy or as a growth strategy, but as an expression of the heart of who we are as a religious community, as a Unitarian Universalist religious community – and as an opportunity for spiritual practice.

It pains me, as I imagine it does every one of us, when I learn that someone did not feel welcome when they came to Old Ship, or that they felt or feel isolated during our Fellowship Hour. And since none of us wishes anyone to feel this way, how does it happen? Why aren't we more warmly welcoming and loving all the time to everyone?

The only answer that occurs to me is that it must not be as easy as it sounds!

I don't intend to be flip. There is something in us that too often does "check the pulse of love" – as if we are telling ourselves that love is not permitted in one situation or another.

What is it? Fear? Shyness? A sort of embarrassment? Forgetting that we are all in this together, that we really are not separate, but are all one body, as Paul expresses it elsewhere in his letter, one interconnected being of human being, of life?

Jacob Needleman, in his fine book *A Little Book on Love* reminds us that the love that happens to us, that we fall into, is one thing. Intentional love, what Christians call *agape*, Buddhist compassion, is another. And to tap this intentional love (coffee hour love we might call it) we need to find ways to cut through whatever fear or shyness or sense of separation we feel.

One way is to practice. Just as we would practice the piano if we want to play a Bach etude. And this *is* a spiritual practice, at the very heart of who we are as human beings and as a community.

What would it be like if every one of us, all the time, came here each Sunday with the intention to *practice* hospitality and love. It might sometimes and for some of us be a difficult thing to do, but if the main thing is indeed love, then what a wonderful opportunity we have here each week to grow in our ability to express our love, to cut through whatever it is that makes us feel separate. This is not the job of one committee only, or of some of us only. It is the spiritual work for all of us.

And though this *isn't* always easy, it may well be our primary task here – to learn to love better, or as Kimball puts it in his book, at least to improve the odds on love.

And though it isn't always easy, neither is it impossible. Sometimes in fact it can be quite simple: As simple as saying "hello, how are you" to someone here we've never met. As simple as opening the circle of your conversation during Fellowship Hour to someone standing alone nearby. As simple as walking across the room to someone standing alone and introducing yourself. Might turn out it is someone who has been a member for 50 years and relatively speaking you will discover that you are the newcomer! Or it might be an actual newcomer, who, because you have taken the time and made the effort, just might still be here 50 years from now.

You see, our worship service *and* our time following the worship service, along with our religious education classes for all ages, are not merely social or educational events. They are

that, but they are at the same time spiritual occasions to which we can bring spiritual intentionality:

“Today,” we can say to ourselves, “I will practice being more loving.”

What could be a better way to spend a morning? A day? A lifetime?

Because love – not weak sentiment, but the most powerful force in the world – love *is* the main thing. And as we learn to love better, we will find the barriers of ego and fear begin to dissolve, we will more and more experience that we are part and parcel of one another and of the larger life, cosmos, God.

Further, in a world in which so many forces are arrayed against love, all the more important to have places like this, places where love is spoken, love is lived, places where the only rule is that once you come in the door, you leave it open for the next person. Places like this which serve as models for our world and for our nation as we would want it to be, so that – to offer just one important, timely example – those of us of European ancestry might unlearn the temerity of a people whose ancestors came here and settled on land that belonged to others, now turning around and deciding who else can come and who cannot.

It *is* fairly easy merely to say words of love. But whatever our age, we can always and still be getting closer to our heart’s center where love lives, still be learning how to best manifest our love (which is, after all, at least as much a verb as a noun, as much about doing as feeling)... through our deeds, through the work of our hands – with one another each day, here, and in the wider world.

After all, as Rumi put it hundreds of years ago:

The rule that covers everything is:

How you are with others, expect that back.

(translated by Coleman Barks)

Yes, fairly easy to say the words of love. Yet words, poetic, prayerful, or simple and direct, can nevertheless pierce our hearts and inspire our hands. In this spirit, I will conclude with words of prayer:

Spirit of life and love, by whatever name we call you,

Source of all...

Help us to touch that center of our lives, of our hearts, which is you, which is love.

Help us to live more often from that center, from our heart, from our love.

Help us to act from that center, from our heart’s love more of the time, all of the time.

Help us to be kind even when we ourselves are down.

Help us to take another step by the side of our struggling friend even when we are weary.

Help us to reach out to the lonely soul, even if we are lonely too.

Help us to bring love to a world in need of more love...

Help us always to stand on the side of love.

May we continue for a moment of silent prayer for love, more love, in our hearts, in our lives, in our community, in our world... that the beating of our hearts connects us to all hearts... because love *is* the main thing.

--Amen. So may it be.