

## A Father's Love

Rev. Ken Read-Brown

First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)

Unitarian Universalist

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Today is Father's Day, and I want to talk a little bit about the nature of a father's love, something I've experienced both in the receiving and in the giving.

To get there, though, first a few more general words about this word "love" – this word we use often, yet which, though one word, has many varieties of meaning.

In their wisdom the ancient Greeks had several words for love. I suppose it's too late for us to create new words in English, but even so we might enrich our understanding of love by learning about these Greek words (as I did, reading a little book titled "Socrates in Love" by Christopher Phillips, from which I've taken some of this).

First there is "*eros*." It is of course the root of our word "erotic" but has richer meaning than that might suggest.

*Eros* refers to romantic love, and more generally to the love of desire. It is a love which, as most of us know, can be supremely beautiful yet which can also lead us in directions that might not be so healthy for all involved, which has the potential to distract us from other values we hold dear. But at its best, *eros*, desire, can be a powerful motivator for the good, driving us to care for another person, to energize our lives, even to sacrifice for high ideals.

Then there is "*storge*" which refers to the love within families: parents, sisters, brothers, grandparents, nieces, nephews. *Storge* at its best is a love which helps and heals us, which strengthens family bonds that enable us to carry on in the midst of trial and trouble and which at the same time can inspire us to wider service in the world.

Next comes *xenia*, which is love of the stranger... in other words the love of hospitality. This was a high virtue in Mediterranean and Middle Eastern culture, and it can be a healing force when it comes to living and surviving and thriving in a world of sometimes clashing cultures, vast migrations, and so on. It is not an easy love, because there is a somewhat natural human wariness when it comes to strangers. Is this person safe? Are these people dangerous? Who is a friend and who might be an enemy? But this form of love called *xenia* reminds us of the virtue there is in finding ways to welcome the stranger.

*Philia* is the next kind of love. This is the love of friendship. Such a beautiful thing, friendship. To have someone who is neither family nor stranger with whom one feels a deep bond, with whom we might bare our souls, with whom we might receive or offer a listening ear, a healing and helping presence, or simply be able to have a good time. *Philia* – friendship.

Finally comes *agape* – which we can think of as unconditional love, which some consider to be the highest form of love, the sort of love Jesus taught, where the “neighbor” in “love thy neighbor” might in our usual way of thinking be a stranger, even an enemy.

So: the varieties of love

*Eros* – the love of desire.

*Storge* – the love within the family.

*Xenia* – the love of hospitality to the stranger.

*Philia* – the love of friendship.

*Agape* – unconditional love.

And I’d add one more variety of love, which is the love of the natural world, of the Earth – needless to say more important now than ever.

Further, as I’ve been reflecting upon these varieties of love, it occurs to me that often our love is not solely one or the other, but might be a blend of two or more varieties of love.

We can be a friend to our romantic partner who may also become part of our family.

And our love to a friend or family member is sometimes unconditional *agape* at the same time.

And so on.

The next thing we need to remind ourselves of in regard to all these forms of love is that love, while certainly a feeling – whether of passion, friendship, or welcome – is also and equally importantly a doing. As I remind wedding couples, the feeling of love is nourished and sustained through doing loving things for one another. In short, love is as much a verb as it is a noun:

Love manifest in taking out the trash or cooking dinner. Love manifest in listening without judgment and sometimes in offering advice or counsel. Love manifest in supportive words, a helping hand, and sometimes in a letting go.

Well, all this brings me to the title of my sermon, “A Father’s Love.”

Clearly, a father’s love holds much in common with many other forms of love – manifesting care and concern in one way or another.

But are there qualities that, if not entirely unique, tend to characterize a father’s love without putting that love into some stereotypical box or category? (The stereotypes fed by advertisers with their suggestions of perfect Father’s Day gifts: power tools, sporting equipment, ties...)

Mostly I can only speak from my own experience of my father’s love and of the ways in which I have tried to be a loving father.

My father?

He could be a sterner disciplinarian than was my mother, which was mostly a good balance. Though I remember, not with pleasure, him telling me when I was quite young just to stop crying as I was wailing about something and I could only respond through my tears that you can't just stop crying, not just like that.

But most by far of my memories are more salutary:

His playing catch with me at the end of a day when I realized only much later that he was likely quite exhausted after his day of surgery and office hours.

His bandaging me from one or another mishap, using his surgeon's skill to make sure I was just fine.

Walks around the block when I was struggling with some school assignment or some other dilemma (a word I learned from Dad), to talk and just to get the cobwebs out, to get some perspective (another word I learned from Dad).

In later years sharing runs with Dad and... still... talking about my problems or the problems of the world.

His unspoken yet clear sympathy for me in the midst of some sorrow.

His wisdom, for example in taking us all to the beach on a cold autumn day in the wake of Kennedy's assassination. Or his stopping the car so that we could all get ice cream on a hot day as we returned from the cemetery, having just buried his mother. For Dad knew that life had to go on, that of course we could and should grieve yet also take care of our spirits with a walk on the beach or around the block or with a dish of ice cream.

Finally, and not least, Dad's love was manifest simply by example, as we saw him strive to live a life of service and usefulness, a life guided by a moral compass.

Another word about that. Dad would have been very pleased if any one of his three sons had chosen the medical profession as a career. He never pushed this, though. I pushed it more than he: I was pre-med on three separate occasions!

But finally I realized that the example he set was not how to be a good doctor, but how to do one's best to be a good person. So I finally got around to following my own path in that striving we all share – with Dad's unconditional (love as *agape* and *storge* blended) support.

Can and do mothers do all the sorts of things I've outlined? Of course. Friends too. But there remains some quality that I still can't quite name about a father's love, just as there are unique qualities to a mother's love – or friend's love, and so on.

And though I am as much my mother's son as my father's son, today is about a father's love.

I surely do not feel I've succeeded as a father in all the ways I would like, but I do feel I've tried to manifest *storge* as a father as best I can – *storge* (familial) love often I hope coupled with *agape* (unconditional) love and *philia* (friendship) too.

Perhaps this is why I appreciate that song we heard earlier, "Love Without End, Amen." We hear in the simple verses an unconditional father's love first passed along from one generation to the next and then imagined as the universal unconditional love of a God portrayed in the song as a loving father – love without end, amen.

Look, I know not everyone has experienced a father's love in the best of ways from their father. And I expect we all are poignantly aware of the ways in which we each have fallen short in our loving, whether as fathers, mothers, sisters, brothers, friends. My father sometimes fell short, and I certainly know I have.

After all, if we always got this loving thing right, we might not feel a need to gather together each Sunday as we do, gathered among other reasons to remind ourselves – whatever our particular roles and relationships in life – to remind ourselves of our best selves, and to remind ourselves of the love at the root of, well, really at the root of everything, the love we can tap into, the love we can allow to flow through us to those we feel the most love for, and flow as well to the world we love in spite of all the ways the world can sometimes disappoint us.

With these sorts of considerations in mind, I'll share again this quote from Denise Levertov I mentioned last week:

We have only begun to love the earth. We have only begun to imagine the fullness of life. So much is in bud.

After all, maybe we sometimes feel that we have only begun to love not only the earth, but each other. This said, beginning is sometimes the best place to be: fresh start every day, new beginning every day in love.

So may it be.