

**The Greatest of These**  
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First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)  
Unitarian Universalist  
March 15, 2020

*(text of live-streamed worship)*

**Call to Worship**

We gather for worship.  
Though at a distance from one another, we gather in spirit.  
May we feel our care and concern, our love for one another no matter the distance that separates us...  
For we are all, always, connected, our lives interwoven.

During this shared time of worship...  
    May those who need comfort, receive comfort.  
    May those who need inspiration, receive inspiration.  
    May those who need to feel the love... feel the love.  
    Now and always.

**Lighting of the Flaming Chalice**

And may the flame of our chalice - flame of truth, of freedom, of community, of love – symbol of our Unitarian Universalist faith – remind us of all that we share – whether we are side by side in a pew or in distant cities.

**Meditation and Prayer**

Wherever you are, and whenever you are viewing this service, I invite you to pause, slow down, breathe into this moment, breathe into full presence, body, mind, spirit...  
It is from this deeper presence that the deep yearnings of our hearts arise: our prayers:  
For each of us in the midst of this health care crisis.  
Especially for those who have fallen ill.  
And for those whose livelihoods are at risk, those living already from one paycheck to the next, those without adequate health insurance.  
And for our leaders – may they have the wisdom and knowledge to help us all through these days of worry and anxiety and fear.

And as always, we hold in our hearts those who are hungry – that they be fed; those who are without a home – that they have shelter; those who are caught in the crossfire of violence – that they may know peace... may we all know peace.

And as we enter a time of silent meditation and prayer, I light all these candles for joys and sorrow and concerns deeply felt among all those viewing our service, and for all those wherever they may be facing the challenges of these days.... we reach out if not with our hands, surely with our hearts...

As we pause in silence...

## Readings

From Paul's letter to the Corinthians: 1 Corinthians 13

If I speak in human and angel tongues, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give away all I have, and if I deliver my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing.

Love is patient and kind; love is not jealous or boastful; it is not arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrong, but rejoices in the right. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends; as for prophecies, they will pass away; and as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away. For our knowledge is imperfect and our prophecy is imperfect; but when the perfect comes the imperfect will pass away. So faith, hope, love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.

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“We Need One Another” by George Odell

We need one another when we mourn and would be comforted.

We need one another when we are in trouble and afraid,

We need one another when we are in despair, in temptation, and need to be recalled to our best selves again.

We need one another when we would accomplish some great purpose, and cannot do it alone.

We need one another in the hour of success, when we look for someone to share our triumphs.

We need one another in the hour of defeat, when with encouragement we might endure, and stand again...

All our lives we are in need, and others are in need of us.

## Message

A little about Paul's letter to the Corinthians, written almost two thousand years ago. These days this passage is often read at weddings. But Paul was not addressing a couple about to be married. He wasn't even talking about romantic love.

He was writing to a little community of people in Corinth, people trying to figure out how to be this new thing called Christian.

Among other things it was clear that Christians were meant to be loving. But apparently the people of Corinth were not doing so well at that – otherwise Paul wouldn't have had to write the letter!

What then was Paul's advice about love – and remember he was talking not about romantic love, but about how to be loving in community – with friends and neighbors... with everyone.

Well, we heard the message:

Love is patient....

Love is kind....

(We can imagine the Corinthians maybe realizing as they heard or read these words that they hadn't always been patient or kind with one another.)

Love is not jealous, boastful... (uh oh... have we also failed on these they may have wondered?)

Love does not insist on its own way... isn't arrogant or rude... (and failed on this too sometimes?)

In other words people of Corinth – work together! Help each other out... do your best to be understanding and forgiving and all the rest.

.... I expect it goes without saying that maybe we all sometimes still need such reminders... and maybe these days more than ever...

Judy Woodruff, the news anchor on the PBS News Hour, on Friday ended her broadcast with a personal message... inviting viewers not just to think of ourselves only these days, but to think of our neighbors in need – maybe sharing food instead of hoarding food, for example....

Which brings us to George Odell's reading: I'm not sure that we Americans, steeped in a culture of individualism, customarily think of ourselves as always in need, throughout our lives. But we are – and the moment we are in right now surely reminds us of this. We do need each other, we depend on each other. And we can help each other, even with as simple a thing as a call to a neighbor, friend, or fellow parishioner: "How are you doing? Is there anything you need? I was just thinking of you."

So many ways to help, to be of use.

I'm reminded of a story told by Rev. Rebecca Parker, the former president of my seminary, Starr King School, in Berkeley, California. She was president at the time of 9/11. As everyone scrambled that terrible morning to learn more, to discover what was happening, and to discern what needed or could be done... Rebecca that morning couldn't find one of her colleagues in the office staff. She looked everywhere.

Finally she found him in the school kitchen. He was making a huge pot of soup. He thought folks might need soup to share on this most difficult of days.

We each find our ways to help, often quite simple and only seemingly insignificant – but never insignificant – for it all adds up, adds up to stronger, more compassionate and kind and loving community. Which surely we do need now more than ever.

So – as we know, these days hand shakes and hugs are not among the ways we offer a gesture of support and love. Instead, we are learning to express friendly greetings with an elbow bump, or for the adventurous a sort of dancing foot bump.

Yet though bumps are sort of fun, I am partial to the namaste bow: the divine spirit within me bows to the divine spirit within you. Or, translate, the best in me bows to the best in you, or the lovingest (to use a word coined by Walt Whitman)... the lovingest in me bows to the lovingest in you.

We are also learning more deeply to experience friendly loving connection virtually, at whatever distance. Of course we already knew how to do this: Photos of a grandchild or niece or nephew or friend or friend's cat or dog... texted or emailed... or just a simple "how are you doing?" – any of these maybe simply answered with a smile or thumbs up or heart emoji.

Not a replacement for actual hugs and kisses. But not bad.

And particularly important now.

So here we have been this morning – or whenever you are watching – in "virtual worship." I invite you to know that you are among – well I don't know whether a dozen or dozens or a hundred or more – Old Ship members and friends connected through these words and images and music....

And perhaps this exercise might help us remember that it is always so, not just in the midst of a health care crisis, but always so that we are connected, whether side by side, in the same room, or at great distance....

So though we are keeping social distance physically as a way of protecting one another's health, we can be ever closer spiritually.

In this spirit I close these remarks with a lovely poem written just a few days ago by one of my colleagues, Rev. Lynn Ungar:

## Pandemic

What if you thought of it  
as the Jews consider the Sabbath—  
the most sacred of times?  
Cease from travel.  
Cease from buying and selling.  
Give up, just for now,  
on trying to make the world  
different than it is.  
Sing. Pray. Touch only those  
to whom you commit your life.  
Center down.  
And when your body has become still,  
reach out with your heart.  
Know that we are connected  
in ways that are terrifying and beautiful.  
(You could hardly deny it now.)  
Know that our lives  
are in one another's hands.  
(Surely, that has come clear.)  
Do not reach out your hands.  
Reach out your heart.  
Reach out your words.  
Reach out all the tendrils  
of compassion that move, invisibly,  
where we cannot touch.  
Promise this world your love--  
for better or for worse,  
in sickness and in health,  
so long as we all shall live.

--Lynn Ungar 3/11/20

**Song – Turn Turn Turn – words from Ecclesiastes, music Pete Seeger**

chorus:

To everything – turn, turn, turn,  
There is a season – turn, turn, turn,  
And a time for ev'ry purpose under heaven.

A time to be born, a time to die,  
A time to plant, a time to reap,  
A time to kill, a time to heal,  
A time to laugh, a time to weep.

chorus

A time to build up, a time to break down,  
A time to dance, a time to mourn,  
A time to cast away stones,  
A time to gather stones together.

chorus

A time of war, a time of peace,  
A time of love, a time of hate,  
A time you may embrace,  
A time to refrain from embracing.

chorus

A time to gain, a time to lose,  
A time to rend, a time to sew,  
A time to love, a time to hate,  
A time of peace: I swear it's not too late!

chorus

**Benediction**

May we, aware of whatever measure of blessings are ours,  
Turn and make of our lives a blessing to all life.

Be well. Be safe. Take care of one another.

May it always be so. Blessed be. Amen.

**Extinguishing the Chalice Flames**

As I extinguish these lights of love, know that our lights shine wherever we go.