

Stronger Together
Rev. Ken Read-Brown
First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)
Unitarian Universalist
June 13, 2021

Readings

1 Corinthians, chapter 13, verses 1-7:

If I speak in the tongues of humans or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. ² If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. ³ If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

⁴ Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. ⁵ It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. ⁶ Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. ⁷ It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

from the writing of Presbyterian minister Rev. Mihee Kim-Kort:

What I realize I need and want to be a part of is a kind of work that cultivates the expansiveness of love. I dream often of the kind of world we could have for us, for our children, if we weren't so concerned with regulating, disciplining, and closeting love all the time. If anything, it's absolutely clear that this world needs more love. Rather than focusing so much energy on categorizing and classifying sexuality and making it conform to narrow representations, I long for our world to encourage lovemaking, to spark in those around me a desire to love ourselves and love each other into more life and love. Because if there's anything I've learned about love, whether experienced among family, friends, or my children, it is that it is contagious and expands exponentially. It overflows the cup. Once released and liberated, it changes everything. . . .

Sermon

Some of you may recall two words that Kurt Vonnegut coined in his book *Cat's Cradle*.

First was "granfalloon" – which, as Vonnegut himself wrote, is "a proud and meaningless collection of human beings." One of his favorite examples of a granfalloon was people from Indiana (his own home state) – "Hoosiers." Here's a few lines from *Cat's Cradle*:

"My God," she said, "are you a Hoosier?"

I admitted I was.

"I'm a Hoosier, too," she crowed. "Nobody has to be ashamed of being a Hoosier."

"I'm not," I said. "I never knew anybody who was."

Vonnegut's point wasn't that granfalloon is bad, but that we are prone to make too much of them and that a granfalloon is often, actually, a relatively weak or loose bond or connection. So, yes, it is of course fun to discover that you're both from Indiana or both went to the same college or both root for the Red Sox. But how deep does such a connection really go?

By contrast is Vonnegut's second coined word from *Cat's Cradle*: "karass." A karass is a group of people who really are engaged in the same important tasks in life. They may or may not even realize that they are in the same karass. Indeed, a karass is a sort of secret team, secret even to the players, the members of this team or group who are deeply connected even though they might not realize it, as they carry out some shared purpose or project in the world.

Now I could be wrong, but it seems to me that some granfalloon are more likely than others to overlap with or even host a karass or two. I like to think that a place like our First Parish Old Ship is like this. We are surely a granfalloon – but I would suggest not entirely a "meaningless collection of human beings." We attract people who have similar questions, who are striving to live according to similar shared values and ideals... striving to manifest love... which is not always as easy as it ought to be in this world of ours, a world that, as we heard in the second reading, need love and more love.

It wasn't easy two thousand years ago either. Which is why Paul felt the need to write that letter to the people of Corinth in order to remind them what love is all about. After all, he wouldn't have had to write his letter if they already had love all figured out. My guess is that they had been squabbling, getting on each other's nerves, arguing about the meaning of Jesus's teachings, and so on. So Paul reminded them just what it means to love one another, reminded them that love is patient and kind, doesn't boast, doesn't easily get angry, always protects, always trusts. All I expect by contrast to the way those people of Corinth had been behaving.

Our contemporary selection from the queer Presbyterian minister Mihee Kim-Kort, is in the same spirit, it seems to me, as she exhorts all of us to stop being "so concerned with regulating, disciplining, and closeting love all the time." Then goes on to state the obvious that by contrast "it's absolutely clear that this world needs more love" whatever form or shape love takes. Let love overflow, she writes, let the contagion of love spread exponentially – which is what love does really want to do if we would let it.

I was once gently criticized by someone, years ago, for preaching too much about love. I had to take issue.

After all, one way or another, life *is* or surely ought to be all about love – love which heals, love which helps, love in families, love among friends, even (or especially) somehow love of enemies, and surely love of the beasts and birds and the flowers and trees, of the water and the air we breathe. For as Whitman wrote, "...a kelson of the creation is love."

When I arrived at Old Ship thirty-four years ago, we were a bit smaller as a congregation and as far as most could tell or as anyone said, we had no LGBTQ members at the time. Which, after a while, I learned wasn't exactly the case... though it was pretty much.

Well, in the mid-1990s we embarked on the Unitarian Universalist Association's "Welcoming Congregation" program, to explore how we might become more welcoming to (in the language of the time) gay and lesbian people. We held forums to educate ourselves, we

encouraged honesty about our feelings, about the homophobia that pretty much all of us had absorbed from our culture. And after a couple of years we voted almost unanimously to become an official Welcoming Congregation.

And it changed us, transformed us, made us a better, more loving, and I would say a stronger community. A few who weren't comfortable with this wider welcoming sadly drifted away from Old Ship. But most stayed and more came aboard, and more felt comfortable being who they are in terms of sexual orientation – and I expect lots of other things too.

Then, when the marriage equality fight came along, we were ready and were as a congregation on the front lines of lobbying and speaking up and speaking out. And when marriage equality became a reality in Massachusetts within a few months I had officiated at a dozen or so same-gender weddings, among the most joyful celebrations I've ever had the privilege to be part of.

Our journey towards more complete welcoming, fuller manifestation of love, of course continues. Continues as we learn how better to be welcoming when it comes to gender and sexual identity. Continues as we learn how better to be anti-racist. Continues as we seek to more fully love one another and love the earth.

And we become *stronger together* as we continue this shared journey in these and other ways.

You see, if the only thing that binds us is that we gather in the same Old Ship Meeting House with each other each week or sign on to the same Zoom link, well that's just the Old Ship granfalloon... and it is a pretty weak bond.

But if it is love that binds us along with the journey to manifest love with patience and kindness, to manifest love as trust and protection for the most vulnerable and threatened, to manifest love overflowing, spreading exponentially, well that's Old Ship as a not-so-secret karass... and it is a pretty strong bond.

Further, it binds us to, links us with, not only each other but with everyone in the larger karass who is seeking "the kind of world we could have," as Mihee Kim-Kort puts it if we were to stop trying to regulate and discipline and even closet love and instead... well, let love be what it wants to be, to overflow, to spread and never stop spreading.

How do we do this? Valarie Kaur, in her book *See No Stranger: A Memoir and Manifesto of Revolutionary Love*, writes this, which I will quote at length, since she says it better than I could:

Seeing no stranger begins in wonder. It is to look upon the face of anyone and choose to say: *You are a part of me I do not yet know*. Wonder is the wellspring for love. Who we wonder about determines whose stories we hear and whose joy and pain we share. Those we grieve with, those we sit with and weep with, are ultimately those we organize with and advocate for. When a critical mass of people come together to *wonder* about one another, *grieve* with one another and *fight* with and for one another, we begin to build the solidarity needed for collective liberation and transformation – a solidarity rooted in love.

Solidarity which means, you might say, overlapping karasses – overlapping with anyone and everyone who is seeking collective liberation and transformation rooted in love.

This past year we at Old Ship have been stronger together simply and profoundly as we have moved through the pandemic: Finding ways to connect in spite of all the limitations and restrictions – through phone calls, emails, Zoom worship, Zoom classes, Zoom meetings, distanced outdoor meetings... all manifestations of our caring love for each other.

All at the same time that many, maybe most of us, were seeking and continue to seek to grow our love beyond our community, to grow our love as we learn more about racism and institutions rooted in a history of white supremacy, more about sexual and gender diversity, more about all sorts of inequities in our nation and in the world, more about the climate crisis that affects us all, but affects some far worse than others.

All about extending love, always more love which makes us stronger together, love the kelson of the creation at the root of our work for collective liberation and transformation.

So may it continue to be. Blessed be. Amen.