

And the Greatest of These

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Readings

from First Corinthians, chapter 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... 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.

from *All About Love: New Visions* by bell hooks:

To live our lives based on the principles of a love ethic (showing care, respect, knowledge, integrity, and the will to cooperate), we have to be courageous. Learning how to face our fears is one way we embrace love. Our fear may not go away, but it will not stand in the way. Those of us who have already chosen to embrace a love ethic, allowing it to govern and inform how we think and act, know that when we let our light shine, we draw to us and are drawn to other bearers of light. We are not alone.

Sermon

As I expect many of you recall, last Sunday my sermon had to do with the reality of our mortality. During the past several days, as I reflected on today's sermon about love which was to follow a sermon about death, the following lines started running through my mind. They come from Henri-Frédéric Amiel, a 19th century moral philosopher and poet. He wrote:

Life is short. We don't have much time to gladden the hearts of those who walk this way with us. So, be swift to love and make haste to be kind.

Well, amen to that! Could be the whole of this pre-Valentines Day sermon, don't you think? "...be swift to love and make haste to be kind."

The problem or challenge is that though Amiel's sentiment seems sort of irrefutable, as good a recipe for living as one might imagine... it may sometimes feels harder than it should to "be swift to love and make haste to be kind."

For example, the people of Corinth, to whom Paul addressed a couple of letters found in the Christian New Testament, were apparently finding it a challenge to be loving. After all, why else would Paul have had to dwell on the nature of love in his letter? And in spite of the fact that the passage we heard earlier is often read at weddings, I don't think Paul was mostly writing about romantic or marital love. He was writing to a community that was finding it difficult to be loving in relationship to one another. Still relevant?

What then was Paul's advice 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 in this way they may have wondered?)

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

In other words, said Paul, people of Corinth... work together! Help each other out... do your best to be understanding and forgiving and all the rest. That's love manifested.

Now, a few of you may recall that I shared those thoughts from Paul's letter on the very first Sunday of lockdown two years ago – at a time when we didn't know how long this coronavirus thing would go on. But we sure did know (it seemed for awhile that everyone knew!) that to get through it we had better do our best to be loving and kind to one another, to be patient with one another, to be understanding, and so on.

Sadly, we've seen how well this has worked out. Not perfectly. Yes, there has been a lot of kindness and patience during these two years; but it has hardly been universal. Think we should send a copy of that letter from Paul to... well, to lots of folks? (Maybe sometimes to ourselves?)

Better than sharing the letter, though, is to continue to be loving and kind ourselves, as best we can, in our families, among friends and neighbors, in our community.

This is more than simply a nice way to be in the world. As the writer and Black activist bel hooks affirmed in the line at the top of your order of worship, "All awakening to love is spiritual awakening." In other words it is about being fully alive.

And once awakened, we are talking about what in the second reading bel hooks called a "love ethic" – love becoming a verb. Which in many situations, as she pointed out, requires courage. One of my favorite words, "courage" – since the root of the word "courage" is the word for heart.

How do we learn this courage to love? If we are fortunate, we learn it from our parents and/or from our teachers.

In the "Story for All Ages" this morning, *Jabari Jumps*, the boy, Jabari, finally musters the courage to jump off the high diving board. It is beautiful how he gets there with the support

and wisdom... and love... of his dad; and it seems to me that among the layers of this seemingly simple story is indeed the way in which his dad helps Jabari literally make that leap.

It was all about love, wasn't it? Love paired with some of the companion virtues, as I call them, named by Paul in the reading from Corinthians. Jabari's dad of course loved Jabari – you can see it in his eyes. But he showed or manifested his love – not just pushing Jabari to jump off the board, not to be a wimp or something like that; instead, listening to Jabari's hopes and his fears and his worries, listening with understanding and kindness – remember, Paul said love is kind.

Further, remember that Paul also affirmed that love is patient, and Jabari's dad was patient with Jabari, gently helping him along, taking the time to listen, not pushing too hard, not insisting on his (dad's) way, but helping Jabari find his own way, find his own courage.

Yes, it seems to me that that story was all about love, all about heart – the recipe to help discover courage.

In her later years my mother would from time to time quote what she said was her favorite Bible verse: “Be ye kind to one another.” This comes from another of Paul's letters, his letter to the Ephesians. She would then often follow-up by saying, sometimes somewhat vehemently, that you can't *love* everybody, but you can be kind to everybody.

I chose not to argue the point. For lots depends on how you define or understand “love.” If you understandably think that love is something only reserved for family and dear friends, then of course my mother was exactly right. And that makes sense, doesn't it – our family and friends do quite naturally have a very special place in our circles of relationships.

I would not suggest, for example, that I love those served by, to use the example of today's outreach offering, the Boston Health Care for the Homeless Program in the same way that I love my children and grandchildren. Of course not. But even so, it *is* I believe all about love in its many manifestations: a “love ethic” as bell hooks put it... “showing care, respect, knowledge, integrity, and the will to cooperate.” She's just naming more companion virtues of love isn't she. (Parenthetically, I would affirm that love is quite simply who we are, not some quality or reality we have to discover or import from elsewhere; love is who we are once we peel away everything that conceals this essential identity – and then manifest through the various companion virtues.)

Back to learning to be loving, to live a love ethic: Mostly I didn't learn this sort of thing from books. I was fortunate – like the fictional Jabari – to have learned it from my parents. Oh, I suppose in some measure through their words, but mostly through the way they lived their lives. I know not everyone is so lucky, so I am very grateful for their gift of loving.

So... what do you do with a gift? You do your best to pass it along.

Not because someone tells you to, says you must behave this way, but because you learn from experience that this is the most rewarding way to live. Or, to put it more precisely:

Living a life as best we can grounded in love and a love ethic and manifesting love as best we can is to be more fully alive, more fully aligned with our essential nature, as I said; it is, after all, to live a life not as a separate individual just trying to get yours, but to live knowing that you are part of Dr. King's “inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of

destiny”; knowing that, in the language of Jesus, we are all children of God; knowing, in the language of the Hindu *Bhagavad Gita*, that we are all leaves on a single tree of life, each and all of us part of the unity of all life, our essential identity

Doesn't all this suggest the spirit in which we would choose to live?

Well, of course. Right?

But it is not always easy.

Living now, for example, in the midst of pandemic challenges and restrictions, living in the midst of extreme political polarization and way too much selfish bad behavior... manifesting a love ethic, manifesting love is indeed not always easy. But it never has been; it has always been a challenge: After all, Paul wrote that letter to the Corinthians two thousand years ago!

Yet just as the challenge of the high diving board gave Jabari the opportunity to tap his courage and gave his dad the opportunity to show his love... so do the challenges posed by the times in which we are living offer us the opportunity in our short lives, as Henri-Frédéric Amiel reminded us, “to gladden the hearts of those who walk this way with us.”

So... yes, let us as best we can, in these times and all times, “be swift to love and make haste to be kind.”

So may it be. Amen. Blessed be.