

Love in Action

A Sermon Delivered on February 14, 2010
by
The Reverend Axel H. Gehrmann

*“Love alone
is the true seed of every merit in you
and of all acts for which you must atone.”
-- Dante*

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Reading: by the psychologist David Buss, author of "The Evolution of Desire," from a short piece on True Love (*New York Times*, Jan. 4, 2005)

I've spent two decades of my professional life studying human mating... While love is common, true love is rare, and I believe that few people are fortunate enough to experience it. The roads of regular love are well traveled and their markers are well understood by many - the mesmerizing attraction, the ideational obsession, the sexual afterglow, profound self-sacrifice and the desire to combine DNA. But true love takes its own course through uncharted territory. It knows no fences, has no barriers or boundaries. It's difficult to define, eludes modern measurement and seems scientifically woolly. But I know true love exists. I just can't prove it.

Reading: by the contemporary author Thomas Lynch, from a piece entitled "Making for home" (*Christian Century*, May 5, 2009)

When I was a child I spoke as a child, understood as a child, reasoned as a child. I knew my parents loved me best and assumed my several siblings all agreed. I mistook abundant love for especial favor and blessings for entitlements, and I took pride in things I ought to have been simply grateful for. I mistook good fortune for God's approval and worldly outcomes for the will of God. Kennedy won because God was on our side. When my grandfather died, I assumed it was me--something I'd done or failed to do. Maybe the first time I ate meat on a Friday, at Bobby Bacon's house. It was baloney.

I believed that ours was the one true faith and that I ought to disabuse my unenlightened neighbors of theirs. They said theirs was the way and truth and light. One even claimed to be chosen by God. We all called each other vile, hateful, childish names. "Bile and rancor," my mother called it and sent me off to see the priest. I was passionate and undismayed.

It is in childhood that we come by our identities--those elements of tribe and sect, people and place, race and creed and geography that tell us who we are, where we come from, to whom we belong. These identities align us with one crowd and separate us from others. In childhood we learn the power of naming and its perils. Irish Catholics, Missouri Synod Lutherans, Reform Jews, Sunni Muslims--this taxonomy makes safe the way for later variations: right-wing evangelicals, radical Islamists, secular humanists, Zionist Jews. This "naming and claiming" can be a comfort and scourge, the way both God and the devil inhabit details. The same for every baptism, every initiation ritual: it marks us as aligned with some and at odds with others....

Reading: by feminist theologian Carter Heyward (*Christian Century*, Oct 21, 2008)

The love of God and neighbor must never be a basis upon which we seek to destroy our sisters and brothers. This is a spiritually complex, challenging matter. Case in point: I am outraged when I see images of young Afghan girls burning themselves to death because the Taliban have accused them of Shari'a violations or because their own families are shaming them. Yes, perhaps I react as a cultural imperialist, a Western feminist critic of

another's way of life. But my rage and critique are steeped in my understanding that the love of God and neighbor is not being extended to Afghanistan's women and girls, and that, in this context, the Taliban are sinning against God and doing great evil in the name of Allah.

Yes, we must fight the Taliban: this is a collective moral as well as political responsibility that we must undertake on behalf of Afghanistan's people, especially its women. But wait. Are we using the love of God and neighbor to justify our efforts to destroy these Taliban leaders? Aren't we, like the Taliban, like al-Qaeda, like Bush and Cheney, like religious, political and military leaders from time immemorial, declaring that God is on our side and that whatever killing we do is justified by our love of God and neighbor? What then distinguishes us from the Taliban, from Osama bin Laden or any political leader who dares to assume that God is on his or her side?

I believe that what distinguishes those who claim to be lovers of God and neighbor is not simply the claim to love God and neighbor but how they practice this love. How, in real life, do we love? How, in the middle of a war, can we love our enemies? How do we illuminate the love of God and neighbor as a way of life?

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This year Elaine and I will be celebrating our 20th wedding anniversary. We have shared 20 years of marital bliss, and we think that is a pretty big deal.

In some ways, not much has changed between us since we first met at divinity school in Berkeley, California in the mid 1980s. We still enjoy long walks together, and shared cups of coffee. We continue to have very compatible movie preferences, and sense of humor, and culinary tastes. We still see eye to eye in matters of religion and politics, and how to spend our money, and how to raise our kids. In all these areas of compatibility, we have also always had our differences, which, I would like to believe, provide the creative tension in our relationship.

Why did Elaine and I get seriously involved with one another? Because we were in love. Because a unique chemistry was at work whenever we spent time with one another. An electricity. Something that made our every interaction, our every phone conversation, our every letter exchanged, strangely intense. Love heightened the quality of our interactions. But it also changed each of us.

Whatever it was that was going on between Elaine and me, it also touched something within me. In some strangely intangible way, I felt more fully alive than I had felt before we had met.

The love I first felt over twenty year ago persists to this day. But it has not remained unchanged. Living together, growing personally and professionally, having children and building a home, all of this has provided us with a certain degree of challenges over the years. There have been moments of fear, and moments of frustration. The excitement of novelty, so integral in a young relationship, has given way to a different kind of excitement, a deeper excitement that carries the weight of two life decades shared.

Many authors and artists have observed the distinct difference between new love and “mature” love. Some have gone so far to suggest that they are, psychologically speaking, two different phenomena altogether.

Love comes in all sorts of shapes and sizes. The word itself is used in so many different contexts, that I sometimes worry its meaning has become diluted to the point of being meaningless. I love my wife, but I also I love spaghetti carbonara. (Luckily for me, Elaine is a great cook, so I don’t need to choose one love and exclude the other.)

When the word “love” is used casually, it can be reduced to a thoughtless figure of speech, or to a trite cliché. This is a shame, because love, in its many shades and subtleties, can become more meaningful to us, rather than less, when we are mindful of love’s multitude manifestations.

Rather than slip lightly off the tongue, love should give us pause. It should make us stop and wonder, what it is that somehow takes shape in the romantic infatuation between youngsters, as well as in the profound and unconditional connection felt between parent and child. What is it that exists between the octogenarian couples that have spent a half-century together? One couple I know consider each other best friends. Another couple wryly describes their marriage as the “fifty year war” - but an unmistakable bond of affection lies beneath their constant bickering. Love exists between siblings, regardless whether they are close, conflicted or estranged.

* * *

Thomas Lynch writes about the strange fact that the experience of love narrowly conceived can sometimes lead us to imagine ourselves as somehow separate and superior to our peers. As a child he saw himself as the most beloved of his siblings, the one most worthy of parental affection. Likewise, the good fortune he experienced in his happy childhood was understood not simply as reason to be grateful, but rather as proof of God’s special love for him, as opposed to those less favored by the divine.

All things pleasant in life, he took as proof that he and his family were the among the chosen, the ones who embraced the true faith. And so at an early age he learned to separate himself from others. Using familiar categories of culture and creed, of race and religion, he learned to separate us from them, friend from foe -- and all in the name of love.

* * *

Carter Heyward writes, the religious “commandment to love is the basis of all the world’s major religions.” You would think that this inter-religious consensus would create a singularity of purpose among the world’s believers. You would think that because a variation of the Golden Rule, or the charge to “love thy neighbor as yourself,” exists in all great religions, this would suffice to banish war forever.

Clearly it doesn’t. As a Christian, Heyward wonders, aren’t we, just like the Taliban, like al-Qaeda, like religious, political and military leaders from time immemorial, declaring that God is on our side and that whatever killing we do is justified by our love of God and neighbor?

I whole-heartedly agree with her. Far too often I have seen professed Christians assume a “holier than thou” attitude. Far too often I have heard religious language used for the sake of self-righteous self-justification, and enthusiastic condemnation of those who believe differently.

This is what distinguishes contemporary Unitarian Universalism from our Christian heritage. We reject any creed that seeks to separate the saved from the rest. We affirm universal salvation, and an all-loving God.

Or at least, that is what I would like to believe Unitarian Universalism is all about. But truth be told, we are not immune to exclusivism. We are just as vulnerable as others to the temptations of an us-versus-them worldview. Both God and the devil are in the details.

For instance, perhaps some of you recall the “Standing on the Side of Love” campaign, that was the focus of a Sunday service last month, and a recipient of our shared offering. “Standing on the Side of Love” is a public advocacy initiative designed to “harness love’s power to stop oppression.”

“Standing on the Side of Love” took its name from the title of a hymn that appears in a new hymnal. The hymn was written a few years ago by the UU minister of music, Jason Shelton. Jason, in turn, was inspired to write the hymn after hearing the Rev. Bill Sinkford, who was president of the UUA at the time, use those words to describe his vision of social engagement. Sinkford said, “Unitarian Universalists stand on the side of love, not on the side of fear and shame. But fear and shame, and the injustice and hurt they inevitably cause, are rampant in our culture and getting worse.” He was talking about the religious right in this country, and those who oppose marriage equality, who oppose a woman’s right to choose, who oppose sexuality education for our children.

Now, I certainly support the causes Sinkford is seeking to defend, and I like the rousing hymn Jason Shelton wrote, and I think the public advocacy campaign is a good thing.

I just wonder about the slogan “Standing on the Side of Love.” Clearly it is serving to unite and energize like-minded religious liberals. But I wonder about the implication of

the slogan. If those who believe as we do are standing on the side of love, who is standing on the other side? Do those who believe differently stand on the side of fear and shame and hate? If God is love, does that mean we have God on our side, and those on the other side are godless?

* * *

The Buddhist teacher Sharon Salzberg writes about the Buddhist approach to love. The defining characteristic of true love, she says, is that it overcomes the illusion of separateness. Love overcomes the illusion of not being a part of the whole.

She writes,

“What unites us all as human beings is an urge for happiness, which at heart is a yearning for union, for overcoming our feelings of separateness...

If we look at the root of even the most terrible addictions, even the most appalling violence in this world, somewhere we will find this urge to unite, to be happy. In some form it is there, even in the most distorted and odious disguises. We can touch that. We can draw near and open up. We can connect, to the difficult forces within ourselves, and to the different experiences in our lives. We can break through the concepts that keep us apart. This is the true nature of love and the source of healing for ourselves and our world. This is the ground of freedom.” (*Loving Kindness*, p. 21)

The Buddhist tells us, when we love, we are able to embrace all parts of ourselves, as well as all parts of the world. Practicing love illuminates our inner integrity. It relieves us of the need to deny uncomfortable aspects of ourselves.

“When we feel love, our mind is expansive enough to include the entirety of life in full awareness, both its pleasures and its pains.” When we feel love, we can embrace both our compassion and our fear. When we feel love, we know our hearts contain both shame and confidence.

Sharon Salzberg says, a loving mind is not ruined by anger, it is not shattered by change. A mind filled with love is like the sky with a variety of clouds moving through it - some light and fluffy, others ominous and threatening. “No matter what the situation, the sky is not affected by the clouds. The sky is free.”

* * *

When we stand on the side of love, in the best sense of these words, we are neither separating ourselves from others, nor denying the difficult dimensions of our own lives. When we truly stand on the side of love, we are able to open our minds and hearts far enough to embrace all of life. Then we stand on the solid ground that lies deeper than all division. Then we overcome the illusion of separateness, and see we are all part of the whole.

Thomas Lynch writes, this “simple, saving truth in a complex and perilous world, is one we too rarely get glimpses of. It asks us to put aside childish things; to see that we are in this together, that we all have strayed, all feast, all fast, all suffer and pray, all wander in the desert and want to get home to the God of our making and creation-- [a God who] hears all our prayers or none of them.”

True love takes its own course through uncharted territory, David Buss tells us. It knows no fences, has no barriers or boundaries. It's difficult to define and eludes modern measurement. True love exists, even if we can't prove it.

May we be mindful of all the different dimensions of love we have known, through times of pain and times of pleasure.

May remember the vast diversity of people we have loved and who have loved us, whether we knew them years or for moments, for each of them offers us a glimpse of a true love that can heal our world. May our every word and deed be guided by a vision of such love.

Amen.