

WHAT WONDROUS LOVE IS THIS?

by Rev. Kit Ketcham, Nov. 21, Dec. 5

This week we celebrate Thanksgiving. Though we have some conflicted views about this holiday, because of the political and human implications of European arrival on this continent and the subsequent mistreatment of native peoples, Thanksgiving has come to mean more than nationalistic pride and gratitude for our bounty.

In fact, in one poll, US citizens overwhelmingly designated Thanksgiving their favorite holiday. Better than Christmas, better than Valentine's Day, both traditionally romanticized and commercialized holiday seasons.

Luckily, Thanksgiving has much less commercial hype than most national holidays. Oh, there're the obligatory turkey, pumpkin pie filling, and sweet potato sales at the supermarket, but by and large, this precious day escapes most of the promotional, commercial stuff that we are bombarded with before other holidays. What we mostly get for Thanksgiving is great food recipes and bargains and a sense that being together with friends and family is THE reason for the season.

The topic of this Thanksgiving sermon is "Love"--Wondrous Love, in fact--and as I was writing it, trying this beginning and that, deciding what should go in and what could be left out, I realized just what a huge and complicated topic Love is.

But because Thanksgiving is a time when we express gratitude for family and friends, it is a good time to talk about the love we share with other humans, the love that is bigger than romantic attraction and what that

means as a religious community.

Close your eyes for a moment and think back with me, to the first time you experienced real love, knew what it meant, finally, to love. Was it when you were a child, feeling close to a parent? Was it as a teen, madly in love with the boy or girl of your dreams? Was it with your best friend, when you realized that you really loved this other person? Was it when you met your mate and knew that you had given your heart to him or her? Was it when a special pet came into your life or you found a place to call home? Was it when a child lay in your arms and you experienced love so profound that it startled you?

I'll never forget the moment that a nurse laid my squalling baby boy in my arms to teach me to nurse him. My feelings welled up so strongly, so overpoweringly that I broke into tears. I had never in my life experienced love so profound. It became a standard for me, against which I measured my commitment in other relationships.

I realized that I had received that same love from my mother, though, in typical childish fashion, I was too busy being a kid to appreciate it. Now that I was a mother, I could understand better what she had experienced.

Scholars tell us that there are at least three forms of love in human life: *eros*, which is a striving for pleasure and biological fulfillment; *philia*, which is friendship based on mutual attraction and respect; and *agape*, which is a selfless devotion to the wellbeing of another.

In all the world's religions, there is an accounting of the power of love, whether it be to love one's neighbor, as Judaism, Christianity, Hinduism and Confucianism teach, or to love all things, including Heaven

and Earth, as we learn from Buddhism and Shintoism.

The world's religions also teach love as a way to overcome evil. A Buddhist teaching says, "Conquer your foe by force and you increase his anger. Conquer by love, and you will reap no after-sorrow". Hinduism says, "With kindness conquer rage, with goodness malice; with generosity defeat all meanness; with the straight truth defeat lies and deceit."

In secular life, we tend to equate Love with romance. We sexualize it, worry about losing it, pursue those who could give it to us, fantasize about the partners we would like to be with.

We use the word pretty lightly sometimes. "Oh, I love it!" we'll say, about a new outfit or a piece of art or music. We love chocolate. We love Beethoven. We love our new clothes! Our kids love soccer or video games or Disney movies or dolls or school.

But every once in awhile, something will startle us into realizing that love is far more than a preference for a kind of coffee or a color or a book or CD. We may experience an argument with friend or mate, a deep disappointment in a child, a sudden illness, a difference of opinion between members of this community, for example----and we are shocked into realizing how deeply we care about a person, an issue, an institution, an ideal.

Now close your eyes for a moment and think back to a time when you felt genuinely loved. Was it when a child threw arms around you and, with face alight, shouted your name? Was it when a parent did something for you that you were able to recognize as completely unselfish? Was it when a friend brought you food when you were sick? Or just called to

say hello?

Was it alone on a mountainside or on a foggy beach when you felt enveloped by the benevolence of this beautiful universe? Was it lying in the arms of your beloved, feeling the intimacy of being together? Was it when your dog greeted you at the door with ecstatic little yelps of joy? Or when your purring cat curled up next to you just when you were feeling a little lonesome.

We have all had experiences of loving and being loved. We know what that feels like. And we cherish those experiences. We also know that many people do not experience love very often. And we know that we would like to experience even more love. We know that love causes us to thrive.

During the year or so of my ministry here in the congregation, people have come to me concerned about their relationships. They were struggling with a number of different concerns, among them how to offer love to others who were part of the community. They sensed that loving others can be tricky, especially when we are so varied in our opinions and practices.

Loving others within a pluralistic religious community is a challenging task. Our first attraction, as human beings, is to people who are physically appealing or intellectually stimulating or funny or outgoing and charming. We like people best who share our opinions, who support us, who bring out the best in us. We have our best conversations with people whose religious beliefs are similar, because we are reinforcing a sense of our own rightness.

But the realities of religious community are not so conducive to harmony and pleasant associations! Within every religious community, liberal or conservative, we find a wide spectrum of people, from utterly charming to utterly obnoxious. Most of us personally are somewhere in between, right? But undoubtedly much closer to the utterly charming end of the scale than the utterly obnoxious, right?

Rainer Maria Rilke wrote, in Letters to a Young Poet, "For one human being to love another: that is perhaps the most difficult of all our tasks, the ultimate, the last test and proof, the work for which all other work is but preparation."

And Arnold Toynbee wrote, "The absolute value of love makes life worthwhile and so makes (our) strange and difficult situation acceptable. Love cannot save life from death; but it can fulfill life's purpose."

We are charged by all the world's great religious thinkers to give love, not only to our mates, children, and family members, but also to our neighbors.

So how do we do this? Let's think about how love develops in us. Love between child and parent seems to be an outgrowth of that relationship, provided the interaction is nurturing and affectionate. I don't mean to imply that the parent-child relationship is idyllic or easy; certainly we know that children are not always lovable, though usually we manage to love them anyhow! Most children experience love from their parents and this starts them on their way toward being adults who are able to love.

But love between unrelated people starts somewhere else. It requires, first of all, that a person be able to love himself or herself, however imperfectly that may be accomplished. Jesus' reminder that we must love our neighbor as ourselves implies that we love ourselves first.

We learn that healthy love of self from our parents and significant adults at an early age, if we're lucky. Many of us augment parental love by seeking help from therapists in later life, when we discover that we have not yet learned to love ourselves enough to give healthy love to another.

As we learn to love ourselves, we gradually improve in our ability to love others. Our first occasion of love is likely to be biologically produced. Our hormones lead us down the primrose path of sexual attraction and desire. We often confuse this with real love!

And it's a pleasant and useful experience, most of the time. But if our love skills are not yet mature, we may find ourselves unable to go beyond this physical sensation into the deeper life of loving.

Our friendships are a good proving ground for our ability to love. Our experiences together can make or break a friendship. If our experiences with our friends build trust and empathy, the friendship can become a loving relationship. If our experiences bring disappointment and betrayal, our friendship is likely to be damaged.

When we find a person with whom we are able to be both lover and friend, we begin to explore a kind of love that can sustain a longterm partnership. Marriage or life partnership offers another opportunity to grow in our ability to love. Loving couples who have been together for many many years describe their ups and downs as occasions to bond more closely with one another.

But we need not be in partnership with another person in order to experience opportunities to grow in our ability to love. Our everyday lives offer many chances to develop our love skills. Our workplace, our kids' school, here in this community, at the grocery store, on the ferry-----there are chances to love everywhere we look.

But loving, as we know, requires some effort.

My own experience has led me to believe that if I just rely on surface knowledge of another person, I may only come to love those who are superficially appealing and on my wavelength, those who are similar to me, not different.

But one of the blessings of being a preacher's kid in a small town, where all the popular kids got to do things I didn't--, one of those blessings was that I formed friendships with the other kids who were less popular and thereby discovered the beauty behind the not-so-beautiful. I learned that if I looked beyond the surface in people, that I would find great beauty.

This usually served me well. Occasionally, I did not find beauty. But as I came to understand human nature and how human character is often shaped by external forces, such as upbringing and education and illness, I realized that inner beauty in some people is just more deeply buried. It requires a real commitment to find it.

In the days when I was a more traditional Christian, I knew that I believed that Jesus was not God, but was the Son of God. It dawned on me that I was the daughter of God. If I was the child of the universe, if I was the daughter of the divine, then others were also sons and daughters of the divine. That if that divine spark was in me, it was in all of us.

Sometimes it's hard to find, especially in the hearts and souls of people whose behavior we consider troubling. But Unitarian Universalism defines it for me: we believe in the inherent worth and dignity of every person. To me, that means we believe that everyone has the divine spark.

I want us to take an opportunity now to turn to the people beside us in the chairs and share briefly a little more of who we are. You can do that in any way you want to, but remember we are all possessors of the divine spark, we are all children of the universe, or God as you understand God.

This is an opportunity to find beauty beneath the surface and I invite you to be real, as you share who you are. It's easy to just exchange names and job titles. But that's not the whole person you are. Try to share something beyond name and job title. If you're not comfortable doing that, be a listener instead of a speaker, for this is another way of being real.

When we see beyond the surface, into the heart and soul of another person, we are planting the seeds of love in our hearts. I invite you to take a few minutes right now, to see the spark of the divine in another person. And don't worry if you're tongue-tied. If you can't think of anything to say, just sit there and grin at one another, or tell one another how silly this feels, but let yourself be open to the wonder of meeting another Holy Child.

(3 minutes?)

One of the truly wonderful experiences of my life has been coming here and coming to love you. You have given me an opportunity to grow in my ability to love, in my ability to be a good person, in my ability to be a good minister.

I'd like to read you a favorite poem of mine, which you may have heard before and even shared with another person. But it is a love letter to you on this Thanksgiving Sunday.

The poem is entitled "Love" and I don't know the poet. I found it first in a book of hand-copied poems that my mother put together when she was a young woman studying at Oregon Normal School in Monmouth. I'll read it from her little book.

LOVE

I love you, not for what you are,
But for what I am when I am with you.
I love you, not only for what
You have made of yourself,
But for what you are making of me.
I love you for the part of me
That you bring out.
I love you for putting your hand into my heaped up heart
And passing over all the foolish weak things
That you can't help dimly seeing there,
And for drawing out into the light
All the beautiful belongings
That no one else had looked quite far enough to find.
I love you because you are helping me
To make of the lumber of my life,
Not a tavern, but a temple.
Out of the works of my every day,
Not a reproach but a song.
I love you because you have done
More than any creed could have done
To make me good,
And more than any fate could have done
To make me happy.
You have done it without a touch,
Without a word,
Without a sign.
You have done it by being yourself.
Perhaps that is what love means,
After all.

Let's pause for a moment of silent reflection and prayer.

Our closing hymn is #18, What Wondrous Love is This.

Benediction: Our worship service, our time of shaping worth together is ended, but our service to the world begins again as we leave this place. Let us go in peace, remembering that we have boundless love to give and to receive. May we share that love abundantly and without strings attached--to ourselves, to each other, and to the larger community beyond these walls. Amen, Shalom, Salaam, and Blessed Be.