

Love Is Why We Are Here

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The Unitarian Universalist Church of Little Rock

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"What will survive of us is love." Phillip Larkin

Opening Words

"There is nothing love cannot face; there is no limit to its faith, its hope, its endurance." - Words attributed to St. Paul in his First Letter to the Corinthians, Chapter 13, Verse 7

Chalice Lighting

"Love and compassion are necessities, not luxuries. Without them humanity cannot survive." - The Dalai Lama

Readings

"Of Love" by Mary Oliver

"Praise Song for the Day" by Elizabeth Alexander

Sermon I missed y'all last Sunday. If you were here for worship, you may remember that I was away, preaching at our congregation in Hot Springs Village --- a great group of friendly people who gather in a beautiful church building. I was honored to be with them. It's good for your minister to visit other pulpits now and then and it's very good for us to welcome other voices to our own pulpit -- and I thank Rev. Stephen Copley of Interfaith Arkansas for preaching and also Margaret McLellan, our Worship Arts team leader, for leading worship while I was away. I had no doubt that you all were in good hands.

But something surprised me -- what surprised me was how much I missed being here with all of you. I missed seeing your faces and hearing your voices; I missed singing hymns together and keeping silence together; I missed just being together for our Sunday worship. As I reflected on what I felt going on inside of me, I realized that once again, I had been surprised by love. I learned early on in ministry that love between a minister and a congregation can take root quickly and yet, each time I feel its power, I am surprised all over again by love.

Love is why we are here. That short statement -- only six words -- is the heart - the core - of my theology. Love, I believe, is why each of us is alive and breathing; we are here to learn to love others and to learn to let others love us. And love, I believe, is why we gather together in congregations, for a congregation is a group of folks who join together to share the journey of becoming more fully human -- and that means getting into the sometimes very hard work and often messy business of learning to love and to let ourselves be loved.

Love, I believe, is the essence of ministry, that practice of a minister and a congregation walking alongside each other on a journey, a journey that can be both arduous and amazing, a journey that can bring both laughter and tears, a journey that may lead to places that neither the minister nor the people may imagine. We walk together, to borrow the words of the poet, *"into that which we cannot yet see."* Ministries and congregations are built not by strategic plans, not by church by-laws, not by policies and procedures, as necessary as all of those may be; Ministries and congregations are built, instead, by love.

Love is our worship theme for this month of February. Next Sunday is Valentine's Day and also the day I'll be preaching an auction sermon – that's right, a sermon that was bought and paid for last fall by one of our members who was the highest bidder. I confess, it's true: to balance the church budget, your minister will go to great lengths. The high bidder, Bruce Hill, asked that I preach on Valentine's Day morning as a gift to Barb, his wife of 49 years, a sermon about love and marriage. I've been preaching for nearly twenty years now, but I've never before dared take on that topic. It's for a good cause, though, and it's not just about the money. On Valentine's Day afternoon, our congregation, in keeping with Bruce's and Barb's vision, will partner with the Human Rights Campaign to host a celebration of love, a celebration, one year after the Supreme Court declared marriage equality the law of our land, of the many ways we humans love one another. And on February 21, Rev. Kenn Hurto of the Unitarian Universalist Association will lead worship with me. Everyone is invited to be a part of the conversation he'll lead on Friday evening and on Saturday, a conversation about the life and future of our congregation. And then on Sunday morning, Rev. Kenn will continue our exploration of what it means to love and to let ourselves be loved here in our congregation. There's a lot going on here at your church in February and it's all about love.

"What if," the poet asks, *"the mightiest word is love?"* Love is a word that's easy to say but a word that it can take a lifetime to understand. We deepen our understanding of what it means to love with living – and the living is not always easy. Just as we learn about love from birth and new life, we can learn about love from death and lives that end. Last month, I said good-bye to my brother, a hard time for sure, one of the hardest I've known, but also a love-filled time. Love surrounded Jack in his final days and, after his unexpected passing, love surrounded me and my family as we mourned. You all were a part of that love and I will be forever grateful. "Love stronger than death," I sometimes say at memorial services, for I know those words to be true. I witness this truth when I minister to grieving families and life also has brought me times when I have learned this truth first-hand. My answer to the poet's question is "yes". Yes, indeed, love is the mightiest word.

Love is also at the center of our Unitarian Universalist way of faith. If someone asked me to speak only a single word to explain our theology, my answer would be "love." We may not all share the same exact beliefs but if you look at who we are as a faith, if you look at everything we say and just about everything we do, you will see that love is what we are about and love is who we are – or at least who we aspire to be. (More about that later.) Our two poets today lead the way in speaking our faith, a faith to live by, a faith grounded in love – love for the world and love for all humankind.

Love can be the core of our lives, the poet Mary Oliver teaches, love for people and trees and places, love for music and clouds and the sun, a fervent, shining and giving love of the world. This is our faith: we live with love of the world. We strive to live with our hearts open to life. Even when our hearts are heavy and the days seem dark, we look toward the new day. We open our ears to the song. We pay attention to the seasons of the sun. We do what we can to care for this world and its people.

Out into our world and to its people is where the poet Elizabeth Alexander takes us as she asks if love is *"the mightiest word"* and then shows us a way forward, a way to *"walk into that which we cannot yet see."* The way, she teaches, is love – Love I a *"love beyond marital, filial, national, a love that casts a widening pool of light."* The poet is speaking our language, our faith, our message of love for all humankind, the gospel, or "good news," rooted in our Universalist heritage, as she invites us to join in a *"praise song for walking forward in that light."*

Our praise song for walking forward is a song of love, and we start right where we are with the people right around us. It matters how we treat one another in this life, a teaching common to all the spiritual traditions of our world. It matters how we treat the people we live and work with. It matters how we treat the people we know and the people we don't. And it matters how we treat the people we go to church with – the people we sing with and pray with, the people we go to meetings with the people who, despite our differences, walk alongside us on our journey of becoming more fully human. We, as I hinted before, aspire to be a loving people and often we are people who love with big hearts. But we are all human here. We will not always agree. We will hurt one another's feelings. Sometimes our words and our deeds may be less than loving. We will make mistakes, that one is guaranteed, and I may make the most mistakes of all. And yet, no matter "how wide and far we stray," the words of the hymn remind us, we can walk forward together with the "love that casts that widening pool of light" and it is that love that will free us and save us.

To our new members we welcome today - to Chad and James, to Christina, to Barb, to Mary Lowe, to Paul and Diana, to Ric and Jane, to Laurie and Chris (and to Benjamin, our "member to be") to all of you we say, walk with us in love. We promise to walk forward with all of you with the "*love that casts that widening pool of light.*"

We can spend our lives laying up earthly treasures, but all the treasure in the world can rot and wither and fade away, scripture teaches, all earthly things may one day lie in ruins, but not the greatest gift, the love we give and the love we receive. I have witnessed this truth again and again. As another poet says, in words I carry in my heart, "*What will survive of us is love.*"

When we open our hearts to love, we open our hearts to life and to the Divine, writes the late Forrest Church, who served as minister of the All Souls Unitarian Universalist Church in New York City for 30 years. In his last book entitled, *Love & Death: My Journey through the Valley of the Shadow*, he writes about his own journey with cancer and the knowledge that his time here on earth was coming to an end. "*We are born into a great mystery,*" he writes. "*We die into a great mystery. In between – in that little dash between the dates on our tombstone – (he concludes) what we know of God we learn from love's lessons. . . . When love dwells in our hearts, we dwell in God's presence.*"

"*What we know of God we learn from love's lessons When love dwells in our hearts, we dwell in God's presence.*" After more than five decades of living, I know this to be true. Anything I know about God or the Divine, I have learned from being in relationship with other human beings. Relationships can be hard and messy, joyful and life giving, but when we open our hearts to another, we begin to know our God.

What I know of God, I have learned in a long-term marriage with my wonderful husband and soul mate. What I know of God, I have learned from our children, from my mother and father, my sister and my brother, from friends and teachers, and sometimes complete strangers. And what I know of God, I am learning from so many of you – listening to your stories, watching you live your journeys with courage and with great love. What I know of God, I have learned at bedsides and by the side of someone taking a final breath. I know this to be true: "*When love dwells in our hearts, we dwell in God's presence.*" This is my truth.

"*. . . (W)e almost never know when our last conversation with those dearest to us will be,*" Forrest Church wrote in a letter to his congregation not long before he died. "*Death,*" (he continues) *may approach silently on tiny cats' paws or sweep our loved ones (or us) away like a thief in the night. Hence, with our loved ones especially, we should never squander the opportunity when signing a letter, before (ending a phone call) or, from the kitchen or bedroom before the front door slams shut, of writing, speaking or shouting out, 'I love*

you.” Each time I lead a memorial service, I am reminded of the power of love. Even when relationships have been hard and rocky, love abides. And each time I lead a memorial service or say a final good-bye to someone I love, I’ll say “I love you” to our kids even more often than before. They may have found it annoying when they were younger. Maybe they still do. I don’t care. I want to make sure I tell the people who matter most of my love for them. And now that includes all of you – this congregation. I am blessed to serve as one of your ministers – for we are all ministers here. And so I will end this sermon by saying, “I love you.”