

LOVE AND COMMITMENT

A Sermon by Reverend Lynn Strauss

Why are love and death so linked in me. Is it merely, my vocation? Ministry brings me so often to the heart of both weddings and memorial services. To both joy and grief.

Or is it in maturity that we all sense the link...of love and loss, of life made meaningful, at last, by death? Or is it that time brings meaning to bear?

A favorite poem by Raymond Carver is titled "Late Fragment". A question asked of a dying man.

"And did you get what you wanted from this life, even so?

I did. And what did you want?

To call myself beloved, to feel myself

Beloved on the earth."

To feel beloved is different from feeling loved. And perhaps more essential. To be beloved is close in meaning, I think, to being of inherent worth. To feel myself beloved, is to know myself to be worthy.

The moments in which I feel most beloved on the earth are in those moments when I am giving love to others, or expressing love through service.

If giving love is so necessary to feeling beloved, to feeling worthy as a human being...then how can anyone be denied the right to love a person of their choice. How can marriage, the institutionalizing of that love, the public recognition and blessing of that love be offered to some and denied to others?

It is no wonder that young gay/lesbian and transgendered people experience such crisis. They are denied the right to feel beloved on this earth. No wonder so many go through serious depression and wrestle with suicidal thoughts.

When anyone is seen and treated like a category, as part of a marginal group, their individual worth and dignity is taken from them.

Love confers dignity. That is why it matters that we not lump people into categories or identities...that is why we tell the particular stories of our lives-to know one another more fully. It is why we open our hearts and our church doors to the love we all have to give.

For don't all people have the right to feel beloved on the earth? That is why the UUA Standing on the Side of Love Campaign matters. That is why UU congregations are reimagining Valentine's Day as a day of solidarity and action...a day to petition for full equality for all who have love to give.

Sign up for the Marriage Equality Day Feb. 22nd in Annapolis.

Go to the UUA website link to Standing on the Side of Love and sign the petition.

Our Universalist movement was born out of a desire to extend the Love of God to all people...not just a few. Our theology is grounded in the affirmation that Love is the spirit of our church. And so, as a progressive religious movement, we lead for marriage equality.

And some good, religious people still considered this to be a radical position. In North Carolina and Tennessee and even in Washington DC, UU support of marriage equality can uncover a racial divide. In some denominations and churches, African American clergy stand as a block against acceptance of gay marriage. Theirs is a prayerful, carefully considered position.

And UU clergy speaking out publically from a progressive position, realize it is an act of prophetic courage, and are filled with sorrow when this issue separates them from their African American clergy colleagues. It is easy to forget here in liberal Montgomery County that the love we stand for is a radical kind of love.

I struggled with what love story to tell this morning.

The love story I want to tell is of a minister and his congregation. It is the story told by the new senior pastor of the All Souls Unitarian Universalist Church in New York City. Reverend Galen Guengerich wrote about Forrest Church three days after his death this past September. Forrest was minister of All Souls New York for over 30 years. He and his congregation had been through a lot together. His death was a great loss for everyone, and Galen took the opportunity to remind everyone of what Forrest had left behind.

Forrest had shared everything with his congregation. It was a loving and committed relationship between pulpit and pew. It was clear from both Forrest's writing in his last year, and in Galen's tribute that Forrest died knowing he was beloved on the earth. For he gave great love to others.

Galen named five significant things that Forrest left for his congregation.

He left, the courage of diving fully into life. He risked boldly in many areas of his life.

He left the humanity of his life's battles. He shared his doubts and failures as well as his successes. He talked of his divorce and his alcoholism from the pulpit.

He left the bravery of his dying and the wisdom of his writing.

And he left the love he gave.

We all leave the love that we give.

All our lives we are learning lessons of love. And the one lesson that repeats and repeats is that all of us, every single one of us offers and receives imperfect love. It's all we have as human beings...all we have to offer is imperfect love.

And so we practice forgiveness...and we offer one another kindness, as we can. And we forgive again...and we offer imperfect love again.

Why is our love, love across the board, whether love of our children, or of our parents, or of a special friend or even of ourselves...why is our love always less than we wish.

Why does love fall short?

Because we are human...this love that courses through our lives as kindness and gentleness, and longing and good intention...this love is called agape, it is the human form of love divine...and therefore, of course, in us humans, it is imperfect.

If love is imperfect then how can we sustain it? How can we live happily ever after? If we keep hurting and disappointing one another how can we stay married or in relationship?

Love by itself is not enough. We can be our best selves, find the will for kindness and gentleness, find the generosity to forgive...only if love is linked with commitment. Love plus time.

Only with commitment will we stay and try again.

Only with commitment will imperfect love be sufficient.

Only with commitment will we risk heart to heart communication again and again.

Only with commitment will we bless one another with our full humanness.

Only with commitment will we find the courage to dive fully into life, and be brave in our dying.

So I call upon you to give of your imperfect love. Commit yourself to loving relationships. Work at love.

Your worth and dignity is inherent, you are beloved as a person, because you are held within the embrace of a greater love...a love beyond our understanding.

But our human loving needs commitment.

Give of your imperfect love and receive the blessing of imperfect love from others...and when you come to die, you will know that you have left much of value behind.

There is a song in our new hymnbook written by Fred Small, formerly a musician and song writer- now a Unitarian Universalist minister- it is called "Everything Possible". There is a phrase that sings in my mind, that stays in my heart.

Let me end with them:

"the only measure of your words and your deeds,

Will be the love you leave behind when you're done."

The world needs our imperfect love. The world needs the love of us all.

Amen/Blessed Be