

The Mystery and Power of Love

Sermon for February 16, 2020
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*Love is patient.
Love is kind.
Love is not envious or boastful
or arrogant or rude.
It does not insist on its own way.
It is not irritable or resentful.
It does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth.
It bears all things,
hopes all things,
endures all things.
I Cor 13*

Grace to you and peace from the one who is and the one who was and the one who is to come:

Two days ago we celebrated Valentine's Day, and so, today, inspired by this annual celebration, I want to set our appointed texts aside, and instead say a few words about love.

What is love? What does the Bible have to say about love? Where is the intersection of love and faith?

I want to begin with two encounters, both of which left a very deep impression on me.

The first was a rather brief encounter with a man, a white man, in his mid-forties. He was well educated and had a well-paid job, and it looked as if he had everything going for him. But he seemed sad and lonely, and at one point--and I don't even know how the topic came up—he said that he had never experienced love--never, ever. He had never been in love, and he did not believe there even was such a thing as love. Love is not real he said, it is just something people make up.

I was so taken aback by his statement! How could this be? How could a person live to be in his forties and never experience love?

The second encounter happened a very long time ago. I was not yet a pastor; and I served as a

chaplain-in-training at the Austin State Hospital. The Austin State Hospital was a hospital for a great mixture of people: people with mental retardation, people with brain injuries, and people with severe mental illness. Among my responsibilities was a ward for teenagers which I visited about twice a week.

In this ward I met a young boy, an African American boy, who was maybe 13 or 14 years old, and he was hospitalized because he suffered from severe schizophrenia and paranoia. He was considered a danger to himself and others, because once in a while he had some sort of psychotic break and during these episodes he attacked members of the staff and other patients. When these episodes happened he was usually taken to a special cell and then he was locked up for long hours--a treatment, if you could even call it that, which I found horribly inhumane.

I myself got to know him as a very gentle boy, soft spoken, articulate, and engaging. He had suffered much abuse as a child, which was followed by even more abused as he got older, because he was gay and he was clear about being gay. And yet, despite all his hardships, he had a cheerful spirit and a sweet nature. He loved to paint and to sing, and when I visited him, he often showed me his paintings and he usually asked me if he could sing for me. I always said yes, and I enjoyed his singing very much.

One time there was another terrible episode where he got locked up for a long time and I was not allowed to see him. Finally I was able to visit and he said that this time he had a very special song he wanted to sing. And then he began to sing, with a very sure and clear voice, and with great feeling, and this is what he sang:

*I believe the children are our future
Teach them well and let them lead the way
Show them all the beauty they possess inside
Give them a sense of pride
To make it easier
Let the children's laughter remind us how we used to be*

*Everybody's searching for a hero
People need someone to look up to
I never found anyone who fulfilled my needs
A lonely place to be
And so I learned to depend on me*

*I decided long ago never to walk in anyone's shadows
If I fail, if I succeed
At least I'll live as I believe
No matter what they take from me
They can't take away my dignity*

*Because the greatest love of all is happening to me
I found the greatest love of all inside of me*

*The greatest love of all is easy to achieve
Learning to love yourself
It is the greatest love of all...*

When the song ended, I sat there, completely stunned. Where had this boy found the inner resources to cope with all his hardships and still have faith in himself? How had he learned to love himself so fiercely?

So, there you have it: the power and mystery of love. On the one hand, love is so elusive that a 40 year old man who has everything going for him can claim that he has never experienced it.

On the other hand, it is so powerful that it can bring strength and hope to such a seemingly godforsaken place as an isolation cell in a mental hospital.

In the Bible love is considered the greatest commandment. Jesus famously said:

*'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart,
with all your soul, and with all your mind.'*

This is the first and great commandment.

And the second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'

On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets."

[\(Matthew 22:37-40\)](#)

And St. Paul wrote in his letter to the Corinthians:

Love is patient.

Love is kind.

*Love is not envious or boastful
or arrogant or rude.*

It does not insist on its own way.

It is not irritable or resentful.

It does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth.

It bears all things,

hopes all things,

endures all things.

These words are often read at weddings, but when St. Paul first wrote these words what he had in mind was something much greater than romantic love. For sure, romantic love can and should be included in these words, why else would we read them so often at weddings, but in the end what Paul had in mind was something much greater.

What Paul had in mind was really a way of life. A life where love is at the center of everything, not just the way we relate to our sweethearts, but the way we relate to life itself, to everyone we meet, including our enemies, including people who are hard to love. This love that Paul is talking about is much more than a feeling; it is a deep commitment to act in a certain way, a commitment that can sometimes mean hard work.

To love in that such a way takes a lot: It takes patience, kindness, and respect. It takes an open mind. It takes a willingness to trust that others will find their own way, even when they do things differently from the way we would have liked them to do it.

It means to overlook the faults of others and to focus on their strengths and loveliness. It means not to hold grudges, and to forgive - again and again and again. It means to make time, to be there for others even and especially when there so many other things that compete for our time. It means to reach out and connect again and again and again.

What this is asking of us is not only to love, but to love unconditionally, on a very deep level.

Not many people can do this. Of course, we all say we want to do it, but sooner or later we become just a little bit critical, just a little bit judgmental, just a little bit impatient, just a little bit disappointed when others do not live up to our expectations.

Perhaps it is human nature to react that way. And to be able to love unconditionally is something that is really outside of human nature. To love, to really love, to love unconditionally, that is a spiritual gift. In fact, St. Paul calls it the greatest of all spiritual gifts, a gift greater than the gift of preaching, greater than the gift of teaching, greater than the gift of prophetic wisdom. What's more, without love, all the other gifts are really meaningless:

St. Paul writes:

*If I could speak all the languages of earth and of angels,
but didn't love others, I would only be a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.
If I had the gift of prophecy,
and if I understood all of God's secret plans
and possessed all knowledge,
and if I had such faith that I could move mountains,
but did not have love
I would be nothing.
If I gave everything I have to the poor and even sacrificed my body,
I could boast about it;
but if I didn't love others, I would have gained nothing.*

I think the world is in desperate need of people who are committed to such deep love.

And so, the question is how can we cultivate the kind of love that Jesus and Paul and really all

spiritual leaders talk about?

It begins with a deep love for ourselves, and a deep love for our bodies.

Our bodies, not as we wish them to be but as they are: with aching backs and painful knees and stiff shoulders.

165 years ago the poet Walt Whitman wrote very eloquently about the importance of the body. Whitman is famous for insisting that the body is the soul. It doesn't just contain the soul, it is our soul. 165 years later we have yet to catch up to this revolutionary notion.

In our own time this fierce love for the human body has been taken up by a small and creative group of young queer people, especially queer people of color and transgender and gender-fluid people.

Right now, we are in the middle of Black History Month, a time when we recognize and celebrate the contributions and achievements of African Americans. But African American achievements matter every day, not just during Black History Month; and it is not just the historic contributions that matter, but also the contributions that are happening right now, as we speak.

Every day, Black Lives matter. Every day, Black Thoughts matter, Black Art matters, Black Poetry matters.

We live in such violent times where violence is inflicted daily on people of color, on queer people and Trans people. And, of course, poetry cannot make any of this go away, but it can fight back with something that might be called "restorative imagination".

Such restorative imagination is a central feature of the work of Danez Smith. Danez Smith is a young, black, queer poet, writer and performer from St. Paul, Minnesota whose poems are a fierce celebration of black queer bodies.

You might think that a young queer man of color might have little in common with a 60 year old white lesbian like me, and yet, when I read the poems of Danez Smith I feel some deep connection, something that helps me feel alive and strong.

Beyond our bodies we need to cultivate a love for our whole being, where we love all parts of ourselves, our strengths and our shortcomings.

And from there we cultivate deep love for others, especially those who are different from us. Deep love for our family members, especially those who give us trouble. Deep love for our neighbors, especially those who annoy us. Deep love for mother earth and for all the creatures in the world, and a tender heart for creation which is suffering so much right now.

And, I think what is most needed right now is a deep love for our country. These days our nation which is so torn and disfigured by all kinds of divisions: racism and class warfare and hate for strangers and immigrants and people of color. And the only really good way to counter all of this is with a deep and abiding love.

Martin Luther King famously said:

*I have {also} decided to stick with love,
for I know that love is ultimately the only answer to mankind's problems.
And I'm going to talk about it everywhere I go.*

*I know it isn't popular to talk about it in some circles today.
And I'm not talking about emotional bosh
when I talk about love;
I'm talking about a strong, demanding love.
And I have seen too much hate.
I've seen too much hate on the faces of sheriffs in the South.
I've seen hate on the faces of too many Klansmen
and too many White Citizens Councilors in the South
to want to hate, myself, because every time I see it,
I know that it does something to their faces and their personalities,
and I say to myself that hate is too great a burden to bear.
I have decided to love.
(Excerpt from his August 16, 1967 "Where Do We Go From Here" speech)*

This makes love revolutionary, it makes love is a political act. And it is time that we liberate love from its reduction to fluffy sentiments on a Hallmark Card.

Deep love is transformational. It motivates us to work for racial and gender justices, it drives our demands for inclusion, equity, accessibility, opportunity and welcome. It drives us to reject all forms of power that demean, exclude and dehumanize.

Some people think what matters most in this world is a successful career or making lots of money, or acquiring lots of possessions; and some people will spent considerable time and resources in pursuit of these things.

But in the end, all these things will fade away. The only thing of lasting value is love.

Love is the greatest gift from God, and it is greatest gift we can give to ourselves, to others and to the world.

May God give us the grace and the strength to love and to love with all our heart.

Amen.