

*What is this thing called love?*

Sermon for February 15, 2004. by Lone Jensen

The phone calls come at all times of the year but they intensify in early spring. I can usually tell just by the tone of the voice, a mixture of hope, happiness and considerable anxiety what their next question will be. Can you perform a wedding or a service of union on so and so a date? As a Unitarian Universalist minister I have officiated at literally hundreds of ceremonies in all imaginable settings. We have done it on the beach, in parks, in hotels, in churches, in stately and humble homes, on river paddleboats and in tiny rowboats where we merrily bobbed along on large ocean waves. I have watched anxiously as a couple, dressed in heavy satin, stood with sweat pouring down their faces in bright sun and 100 degree, will they keel over? We have done weddings shaded by umbrellas in pouring rain in weather so cold that the shivering bride turned blue in her gloves and a muffler! We have battled all sorts of unexpected perils, mosquitoes, gnats, bees, drunk wasps in the wine glasses, dogs as bridesmaids, lost wedding rings and small children who crawled up under the bride's gown.

Why have I done so many marriages? Because at the time I was the only minister in town who would do services of union or

commitment services which is our way of saying a marriage between two people of the same sex. Often I was also the only one who would marry couples with different faith backgrounds, such as Jewish and Catholic or people who did not belong to any church, temple or synagogue or mosque. We Unitarian Universalists draw our circle wide when it comes to love for which I am grateful.

So does these experiences make me an expert on love? Hardly. But I have developed a tender affection for the couples, so different from each other and yet they all have such a touching faith in each other. They come to me carrying tender and fragile hopes, hopelessly and helplessly in love. If they are very young they still believe in happily ever after and know that theirs will be a perfect union. I may try to tell them that there is no such thing in this world as a perfect marriage but they do not believe me. If we use a Bible reading it is often Corinthians 1.13. Now I disagree with much Paul wrote, such as his admonition for women to cover their heads and keep quiet in church, (not this woman!) but I do like this familiar passage.

*" If I speak in tongues of men and of angels but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to move mountains but have not love, I am nothing. If I give away all I have but have not love I gain nothing.*

*Love is patient and kind; Love is not jealous or boastful; it is not arrogant or rude. Love does not insist upon it's own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrong but rejoices in the right. Love bears all things, believes in all things, hopes all things, endures all things...*

*So faith, hope, love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love."*

I agree. But what is this thing we call love? In some translations love is read as charity. A safer word certainly! But real love is never safe. Nor will it easily be tamed. Just think of spring, that exuberant and utterly indecent season where nature reminds us of how inevitable and deeply embedded that urge to mate, to reproduce, to ensure that life continues really is. Watch the birds go through their rituals of boasting, preening, parading about, showing off their fine feathers, singing fierce territorial serenades and building elaborate nests in preparation and hope. All for the sake of the gene! At least that is what scientists say reducing courtship at least among non-human animals to gene dispensing mechanisms. How they explain the lesbian sea gulls and other diverse animal behavior I do not know. Those seabirds did however inspire a new take on an old song: *I love being a gull loving a gull!*

*But, the poets say, wait just a moment. There is more than genes at play here. You forget about the beauty of all this. Listen to those songs,*

watch the cranes perform their dances and at the very least you have to wonder if there is not also a gene for beauty?

When it comes to our own endless variety of human love, that question of *what is this thing called love* has occupied poets, philosophers, theologians, mystics and ordinary people for at least as long as we have had language. Love is an overused and much abused word. Valentine's day erupts in the stores in a gooey display of pink, red and chocolate hearts, super sentimental cards, flowers and fuzzy Teddy Bear cupids. Your personal reaction will depend on your level of cynicism and your tolerance for overblown poetry and chocolate. But love is seldom so simple. In her book *A Natural History of Love* by Diane Ackerman compares love *to a crystal prism, which reveals a spectrum of colors once the sunlight dances through it at the right angle. The word love in English includes many feelings, which out of laziness or confusion, we crowd into one simple word. As she puts it "everyone agrees that love is wonderful and necessary yet no one can agree on what it is...We use the word love in such a sloppy way that it can mean almost nothing or absolutely everything."*

She has a good point. Imagine you are a very young child listening to your mother talking to a friend. You may hear her say things like: "I love milk chocolate and macadamia nuts. I love strawberry ice cream. I really loved my first boyfriend. Don't you just love this silk

dress? Oh, I'd love to go to Hawaii for the winter." And then she might turn to *you* and say: "Mommy loves you."

Not surprisingly the child may ask: "How much do you love me, mommy?" And with most mothers the answer will be reassuring: "This *much!* " as she embraces the world in a gesture indicating a lot, a *whole lot*. Or the child may get her first lesson in poetic exaggeration, the humans language of love: "I love you as much as the whole world, as deeply as the deepest ocean, as endlessly as the vast Universe." For how can we adequately describe even the simpler and earliest of our loves that between parent and child. Let alone romantic love. And hope against even impossible odds.

We learn first about love as young children as we move from being entirely self-centered to the realization that there is a world and a parent outside ourselves. We discover we can both please and hurt our mother and she us. We are utterly dependent, helpless and we have to trust our caregivers to survive. If they love us enough we learn how to give such love ourselves. That is our most fundamental, most basic lesson in what it means to be human. If a child is neglected, abandoned or abused that child will have a harder time learning how to give love. Or that child may decide that they are not worthy of love. Some of the most destructive people in this world never do connect with others and their universe remains that of an infant. Their survival and satisfactions matters others never really enter into the equation excepts as extensions

of them. I think many dictators fall into that category of dangerous infants with horrific lethal toys. This is not self-love for it excludes connections to the world and to others. Love, as I understand it, always has to do with connection. We have empathy for other sentient beings, we are in awe of the larger universe and we love this varied, magnificent and wondrous world around us. People who have no empathy know only the most extreme of emotions. It is as such people who always puts their needs first and ultimately *only* allow their needs to count, were never really born into *this* world where we live interconnected and interdependent.

But even when there is trust that first love it is never simple. For children grow and change and so do parents. In her book *Everyday Sacred, a Woman's Journey Home* Sue Bender recalls a visit with her grown son:

*"The first night had gone well. The next morning we drove in the rain up to a small town outside of Seattle and I could feel the mood in the car switching. Michael was getting "that look" that says: "why are you being that way?" (But) What I hear is: "why can't you be better mother?" ... How did we get into this mess? This dance is so familiar that it's hard to notice exactly what triggers the upset. We two, who do indeed love and admire each other and are very much alike, manage to get into this snit after being together only a short time - even though we both want the visit to go well..."*

As a parent I can identify with this episode. Change is difficult in any love relationship. When we first love we want our love object all to ourselves. It is infuriating to the young child that his mother has other needs, other loves or any other interests. She should remain just as he wants her. There are elements of this in grown up love as well. So often I hear people complain that their spouse has changed and is no longer the person they fell in love with. Perhaps we would do better in nurturing and keeping our love if we would accept that our relationships are more like organic growing things than a static world of "living happily ever after." Committed love, faithful love takes enormous courage and a fierce determination. A good sense of humor helps too! I am definitely *not the* same woman that my husband Bruce fell in love with, nor is he the same man I met some 23 years ago. For myself I am grateful that we are not. For as romantic, fun and passionate as our first encounters were and they were, almost ridiculously so, with two middle aged people hiding behind doors at work to kiss each other, unable to keep our hands off each other and walking around in a near haze as if on pink clouds, yes as wonderful as that fire was, the truth is that we are more real now. We know each other far better and we love each other in a different and deeper way. We fight now and then, we are far from perfect and there are habits such as me never remembering to close closet doors or tighten jars and his Cajun humorous remarks and complete indifference to how he dresses that will always irritate the

other. But we are deeply committed. You have probably heard the story about the old couple at their fifty year anniversary were asked if they had ever thought about splitting up. "No", they answered: "We have never seriously considered divorce but murder, frequently!" Any relationship, any love, friendship, marriage or union worth its salt will grow and change. Marriage is a journey not a destination.

Romantic love is fun, it makes for wonderful poetry, exiting plays and occasionally great movies but it is not realistic. The lovers look into each other's eyes and see their own ideal images of what a love should be. That kind of love is indeed blind. And the stuff of fairy tales and romantic novels that flourish because they hold up to us an impossible ideal. In those stories heroes and heroines lose themselves in love. They do anything for the beloved. Self-sacrifice is held up as the greatest good. Take the original *Little Mermaid* by Hans Christian Andersen for example. Not the Disney version. As a young child I identified with this beautiful mermaid princess living in her blue garden ringed with seashells where she spent many hours dreaming beside a marble statue of a handsome prince that she rescued from a shipwreck. In her own garden of love she is at peace. But when she discovers the prince is real and saves him from drowning her troubles begin. He lives in a different realm, a human realm that she cannot enter. For love she offers up her beautiful voice and accepts the price of feeling sharp and cutting pain for each step she takes to trade her fishtail to the sea witch for a pair of

ordinary legs. But her quest fails and she returns to the sea as white foam on the waves. She gives up her entire self, her very life for love. Now that may be all right for Victorian mermaids but as a prescription for a happy human relationship it will not do. In his thoughtful book: *Soul Mates: Honoring the mysteries of Love and Relationship* Thomas Moore writes about the mystery of love.

*"A soulful relationship offers two difficult challenges: one to come to know oneself, and two to get to know the deep often subtle richness in the soul of the other. As you get to know the other deeply you will discover much about yourself."* But if we do not like or love ourselves it becomes very difficult to love the other in a way that will not hurt us. If we have a harsh and critical voice inside us how can we think highly of someone who love us? If we do not think ourselves worthy of long lasting love we will not find it. Sue Bender recalls: *"For as long as I can remember I have been listening to a harsh critical voice inside me, but I have lived with it so long that I never really noticed the influence it was having on my life. I not only listened I believed what this harsh judge was saying.*

*The voice passes judgment on everything I do. Nothing I do will ever be enough.* How many of us have such a voice? Love thy neighbor as thyself only makes good sense if you do love yourself. To be intimate means to be profoundly interior. In Latin it comes from the word *inter*, meaning within. To be fully known and loved as we are is liberating,

comforting and evokes deep gratitude. It is that ideal, innermost love that so many religions search for. The Universalists saw God as such a love.

To me love is a sacred emotion and it can be a sacred act. That we dare to love each other knowing full well that we are all mortal is an act of great courage. As in this refrain to a popular song: *It is a human thing, a sacred thing to love what death can take.* Love can make us better people. Which is something we strive for. One of the bad jokes of evolution is that we have evolved brains so that we can imagine a state of perfection that we cannot achieve. But for which we are constantly striving. Which is one definition of religion as well: holding us to ideals we will never fully reach.

Did you know how much of what we do here with each other has to do with love? A colleague of mine said after nearly 50 years in the ministry he had finally figured out what it was he did on Sunday mornings. "Life is so hard on some people. People come here wounded and bruised from their week, they are tired, worn out, stressed and discouraged. Some of them feel pretty badly about themselves too. So I tell them: "You are all right. God loves you and I love you. Now go home." And next Sunday I do it all over again." While I might not say it exactly like that he is right.

Love is expressed in many small ways, in kind and generous acts within a community and within our families. That is why I submit

myself to the weekly ritual of sermon writing with its doubts and pains. But I do not always feel loving. There are days I want to sleep in and days when I am peopled out and have great difficulty feeling loving toward anybody including myself. Yet is on such days that acting in a loving manner may be most important. And love is in the small things.

There are many things I did not agree with Mother Theresa about. But when she said: "We do not do *great things*, we only do *small things* with *great love*." I want to say: Amen, *and so be it.*"