



UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

“Strength to Love,”¹
a sermon given by the Rev. Frank Clarkson
on February 8, 2015

I have a particular affection for today's reading² from Paul's letter to the Romans. My mom and her siblings chose it for their mother's funeral, almost twenty years ago now, as a tribute to their mom, who was a lifelong Methodist, who taught Sunday school and grew roses.

Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good;
love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor.
Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord.
Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer.
Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers (Romans 12:9-13).

My grandmother was a patient and accepting woman. Her default response to most anything we'd ask her was, “That would be fine.” She regularly encouraged her grandchildren to put on a sweater. One of my cousins observed that Gama would approve of almost anything we did, as long as we had a sweater on while we were doing it.

Our theme this month is love. But that word gets used so often and means many different things. Every Sunday we say, “Love is the doctrine of this church,” but what do we mean? That we are always sweet and nice to each other? That's not possible. That we are romantically involved with one another? That would be creepy.

The love I'm thinking about today is a force, not a feeling. That powerful force is at the center of the Jewish and Christian traditions. These faiths say that we are so loved by God that we are compelled to love God back, and to share that love here on earth: “This is the first and great commandment: to love God with all your heart, mind and strength; and the second commandment is like it: to love your neighbor as your self” (Mark 12:30-31, paraphrased).

As Universalists we say the nature of God is love, and so we are compelled to share and spread the love we have known. This is our religious tradition and foundation. It's why we say, “Love is the doctrine of this church.” So what does this require of us? And are we living up to it?

¹ This title respectfully borrowed from Martin Luther King, Jr., who used it as the title of a collection of sermons published in 1963.

²Romans 12:9-20a.

This week I was in California at a conference for UU ministers. One of the presenters was Rev. Michael Piazza, who pastored the first megachurch formed primarily for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender folks. He's also a church renewal consultant, which is why he was with us. Listen to what he wrote in an online essay several days before coming to California:

"I am spending next week with my Unitarian Universalist friends. As I work on my presentations and sermon, I have to remind myself that, as a denomination, they do not claim to be Christian, though many of them are. I deeply respect their commitment to justice and equality and inclusion and science and humanity. When I look at their core values, I often wonder why they are not Christian. In my mind, no one stood more strongly for those very values than Jesus."

He says he doesn't wish we were a Christian denomination because he thinks we're wrong, or that we're not going to be "saved."

"No," Michael Piazza says, "I wish my UUA friends were Christian because, in their passion for justice, inclusion, intelligence, and plurality, they act more like Jesus than many of us who claim the title Christian."

He's saying we are part of a tradition that knows how to love, that knows how to walk the talk, how to stand on the side of love and justice. I hear him saying we could benefit from more explicitly claiming our connections to our Jewish and Christian roots; that this would help us be allies with other progressive people of faith.

We are here to feed the hungry and visit people who are sick; to reach out and welcome strangers and help those in need. I love that we are warm and welcoming here, that we know how to do hospitality pretty well. And I think we are ready to take it to the next level. But let me warn you—it's a big step.

How many of you have seen the movie "Selma"? I haven't gotten there yet, but I will. I want and need to see that depiction of the courage and struggle that changed our country; that challenged our national conscience to admit we were not living up to our ideals of liberty and justice for all.

A key leaders in the march on Selma was John Lewis, who's been a congressman representing Georgia for 27 years. In a recently published book, John Lewis writes, "The Civil Rights Movement, above all, was a work of love. Yet even 50 years later, it is rare to find anyone who would use the word love to describe what we did."

Listen to what he said about this in a recent radio interview:

"Well, I think in our culture, I think sometimes people are afraid to say I love you. But we're afraid to say, especially in public life, many elected officials or worldly elected officials, are afraid to talk about love. Maybe people tend to think something is so emotional about it. Maybe it's a sign of weakness. And we're not supposed to cry. We're supposed to be strong, but love is strong. Love is powerful."

“The movement created what I like to call a nonviolent revolution. It was love at its best. It's one of the highest form of love. That you beat me, you arrest me, you take me to jail, you almost kill me, but in spite of that, I'm going to still love you. I know Dr. King used to joke sometime and say things like, ‘Just love the hell outta everybody. Just love ‘em.’”³

John Lewis does not say this lightly. No. On what came to be called Bloody Sunday in Selma, he was the first marcher to be beaten. The violence was brutal—John Lewis’ skull was fractured by a state trooper’s nightstick, and he thought he was going to die. He bears a scar on his head to this day.

But he has no bitterness toward those men who beat him. He says the training he received, based in teachings by Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr., prepared him and had a tremendous influence on him. He says the story of Gandhi’s march to the sea reminded him of the march from Selma to Montgomery. He said, “There comes a time where you have to be prepared to literally put your physical body in the way to go against something that is evil, unjust, and you prepare to suffer the consequences. But whatever you do, whatever your response is, is with love, kindness, and that sense of faith. In my religious tradition is this belief that it's going to work out. It is going to work out. It's all going to be all right.”

My question for myself, and for each of you, is this: do we have the strength for this kind of love? We may never be asked to have the kind of courage John Lewis had, and to take the risks he did for freedom and justice. But aren’t we called to love with strength and courage? Aren’t we compelled, if we are going to call ourselves people of faith, to this kind of strong-hearted and courageous love?

There are UU’s these days who take seriously our theology of Universalism, and they created a t-shirt that says, “Love the Hell out of this world.” So what does that look like for you? Who are the people you are called to love, even when it’s hard to do so? Because that’s how we will transform things. Martin Luther King said, “Hate cannot drive out hate: only love can do that.”

Two thousand years ago, Paul told the fledgling church in Rome:

“Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them.
Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.
Live in harmony with one another;
do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly;
do not claim to be wiser than you are.
Do not repay anyone evil for evil,
but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all.
If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.
Beloved, never avenge yourselves,
but leave room for the wrath of God;
for it is written,
‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.’

³ Interview from “On Being,” with Krista Tippet, available online at <http://www.onbeing.org/program/john-lewis-on-the-art-and-discipline-of-nonviolence/5126>

No, 'if your enemies are hungry, feed them;
if they are thirsty, give them something to drink'" (Romans 12:14-20a).

Here's what I know: there is a force at work in the world. Call it God, call it the human spirit, call it Love. It doesn't matter what you call it. What matters is that you give your life to it. That you open yourself to it, that you let it pick you up and turn you around, so your eyes are opened to how much this world needs the Love you have to give. So that you are so full of this Love that you become its hands and feet in the world. So you are compelled to reach out in care and concern not just to your friends, but to those who are different from you, who you find it difficult and challenging to love.

This love takes many forms. It may be caring for an elder or a special needs child. It may be feeding the hungry or ministering to soldiers returning from service. It may be engaging in dialogue around difference or confronting systems of oppression. But don't kid yourself—this kind of love is not sentimental or anemic, it will take strength and courage.

And that is why we are here, in this community. To be reminded that we are part of a great Love, so we have the strength to live and share and spread that love. To love the hell out of this world.

So I wonder, how is that Love looking to break forth, here in our midst? What forms might it take? How much strength do we have, to love and to serve?

Will you pray with me?

God whose other name is Love, pour out your Spirit on us. Give us hearts hungry for a new world, where love and justice will reign, and show us the way to get from here to there. Give us strength and courage to love, not just our friends, but strangers and those who are different and even our enemies; so that we will help heal and bless our world. Pour out your power on us, we pray, so that we will do some good while we are here.

Fill us with a living vision, heal our wounds that we may be bound as one beyond division in the struggle to be free.
Grant us wisdom, grant us courage, ears to hear and eyes to see,
ears to hear and eyes to see.⁴

Amen.

⁴ Words by Harry Emerson Fosdick (adapted) from "God of Grace and God of Glory, #115 in *Singing the Living Tradition*.