

“Love and Justice,”
a sermon given by the Rev. Frank Clarkson
at the Universalist Unitarian Church of Haverhill
on February 14, 2010

I want to begin by saying that, just because it's February 14, I have no intention of preaching about Valentine's Day, or romantic love, or relationships today. I'm not inclined to preach about what is, to my mind, a “Hallmark Holiday,” that is, one that exists primarily to sell chocolate, roses and greeting cards.

But before you think I'm a complete killjoy, let me say that I do think it's good that we have a day that reminds us to tell our partners and spouses that we love them. It's good to have a reason to express affection for our friends. It's good to, as James Taylor sings, “shower the people you love with love; show them the way that you feel, things are gonna be much better if you only will.” In that spirit, I want you to know how much I love being your minister, and how much I love you. That's about all I want to say about Valentine's Day, except that I hope you have a good one!

Our culture spends a lot of time and energy on love--in books, movies, advice columns, magazines--we obviously like to hear stories of romance in others, and we look for advice on how to find it for ourselves. We talk about love a lot here in the church, but romantic love, what the Greeks called “Eros,” is generally not what we're talking about. Maybe we should--God knows we descendants of the Puritans could stand to loosen up a bit, and celebrate and enjoy the lives we have been given. Religion too often has separated the spiritual from the physical, and made one high and the other low. It is good to engage in healthy, loving, passionate relationships. We could stand to love our bodies more, to make friends with them and not be ashamed or embarrassed about them. To make time for sensual pleasures--taking a warm bath, getting a massage or giving one, eating a meal slowly with someone you care about, spending an extra hour in bed. If you're in a relationship right now, to be grateful for that and to be intentional about caring for it, and for your partner, to make time for that.

I don't believe that romantic love, what the movies usually portray as love, two people falling “in love,” I don't think this kind of love can last too long. *Eros* is by nature a hot fire that burns quickly. The good news is, it can ripen and deepen and even get better over time, but that takes attention and work and probably some luck. One of the problems for marriage in our culture is when the blush of being “in love” wears off, people sometimes think the love is gone and that it's time to move on and try and find it somewhere else, when sometimes the invitation is to stay where you are and find a deeper, more committed love. And I swear that's all I'm going to say about Valentine's day!

One of the most common, and lovely, readings you hear at a wedding are those words from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. “If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of

angels and have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal....Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends”(1 Cor 13). Paul was not talking about being in love, or about romantic love. He used the word *agape*, the Greek word that describes a pure or ideal love. Paul and other early Christians said *agape* was the kind of love God has for us, and the kind of love that we should have for one another. Sometimes I’ve used that reading at a funeral, and it works there too, because it reminds us that this kind of love doesn’t die, even when people do.¹

This is the kind of love we are talking about when we say every Sunday, “Love is the doctrine of this church.” In the gospels when Jesus gets asked, “What is the first commandment?” he responds, “You shall love God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength,” and he says, “the second is ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself’ (Mark 12:29-31).

Those two great commandments put love at the center, and that is where it should be. Last week I read to you Desmond Tutu’s words about how God loves us. He says that’s the only sermon he ever really preaches--”God love you.” He knows it’s a sermon we need to hear over and over again--because we tend to not believe it and we tend to forget. He knows that if we can accept the fact that we are loved, just as we are, really truly unconditionally loved, then we might actually be able to love one another.

The power that Jesus had, it seems to me, came from the fact that he was one particularly able to feel and embody God’s love, he knew that he was a child of God, he was, as the gospels say, one who was full of the holy spirit.

Around the time I went off to seminary, I started wrestling with some images of God that I had been carrying around with me for a long time, images of a judging God who was never going to be happy with me as I was. It took some time, and some work, and some good friends, to help me see that those ideas and images I had were not true, that the God I’d grown up with was too small, and that I needed to grow up too and develop a more mature faith.

One day in seminary I read an essay by the theologian James Cone called “God is Black,” that really rocked my world. Cone’s theology is shaped, as is anyone’s, by his own context and experiences--by his ministry in the black church and participation in the Civil Rights and Black Power movements in the 1960s. He began to work out a black theology of liberation, and in 1970 published that essay, “God is Black.” He says his “chief concern was to reconcile Martin Luther King Jr.’s accent on divine love in race relations with Malcom X’s stress on divine justice.” He says he “wanted to

¹ In the poem “Epitaph,” Merrit Malloy writes “Love doesn’t die, people do.”

demonstrate that the God of the Christian gospel was not *white* as most Christians and non-Christians, even in the Black community, seemed to believe.”²

Well, as I said, that essay blew my mind. It shook up my theology and my image of God, and though this was not a comfortable thing, it was a good thing. Cone basically says that those of us who lead relatively privileged lives and say “God is love,” may not have thought much about the experiences of those who are marginalized and oppressed. He call us to question what kind of God we believe in.

He writes, “The theological statement “God is love” is the most widely accepted assertion regarding the nature of God (but) there has been much disagreement on how the *wrath* of God is reconciled with the love of God... Black theology... asks... whether the love of God itself can be properly understood without focusing equally on the biblical view of God’s righteousness. Is it possible to understand what God’s love means for the oppressed without making *wrath* an essential ingredient of that love? What could love possibly mean in a racist society except the righteous condemnation of everything racist? ... A God without wrath does not plan to do too much liberating, for the two concepts belong together. A God minus wrath seems to be a God who is basically not against anything.”³

I’ll put it this way: a God worth following has to be both a God of love and a God of justice. Otherwise we create an image of God as a kind of genial Santa Claus in the sky. It is good for me, a white, heterosexual, middle-aged, able-bodied male, be reminded of this; to hear liberation theologians like James Cone say that God is more likely to be found not among the privileged but at the margins. We can and should ask ourselves, “What side is God on?”

The Unitarian Universalist Association has launched an initiative called “Standing on the Side of Love.” This is an effort to say we are standing with those who are marginalized or oppressed because of their skin color, ethnicity, disability or sexual orientation. This campaign asserts that there are implications to being people of faith. That we who believe in the power of love are compelled to work for justice. That religion is not about taking care of your own and is not about serving your own needs-- it’s about loving your neighbor and putting that love into action.

It was Martin Luther King who said, “Power without love is reckless and abusive, and love without power is sentimental and anemic.” To “stand on the side of love” begins with realizing there are choices to be made. It begins with asking yourself, “How am I going to use my power? Where will I stand, and with whom?”

² James Cone, “God is Black,” in *Lift Every Voice: Constructing Christian Theologies from the Underside*, Thistlewaite and Engel, editors (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1998) 102.

³ James Cone, “God is Black,” in *Lift Every Voice*, 107-08.

Some would say that gay marriage is a religious issue, or a social issue, or a political issue. I say it is a justice issue. When our society gives benefits to married people, both tangible and intangible benefits, when we say that we think marriage is a good thing, but then deny it to some because of who they love, this is a justice issue. It's about equal protection under the law. When the military says to our servicemen and women, "We won't ask and you can't tell" about your sexual orientation, you can only serve in the military if you pretend to be other than you are, this is a justice issue. As is when women don't get equal pay for equal work and when race is a factor in who gets arrested and incarcerated. As people who claim a doctrine of love, who say we want to stand on the side of love, there's plenty of ways we can work for justice. There's lots of work for us to do.

Of course, talking about it, as I am today, that's the easy part. Putting it into action, standing up for love and for justice takes courage and commitment. It goes better when you work with others. Our own Welcoming Congregation committee is being intentional this year about being more public about our church's stand in support and welcome of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender folks. Our reinvigorated Social Action committee has changed its name to the Social Justice Committee to reflect the fact that justice work is at the core of its mission.

We won't all do the same thing, and we won't all agree on every issue, and that's good. We need to hear each other's experiences and learn from one another, even when it makes us squirm a bit. We do need to ask ourselves, "What side am I on?" There is always a struggle between those who would like to preserve the existing power structure, and those seeking a more just one. To be people of faith is to claim our place in a tradition that has, for thousands of years, called us to stand on the side of love and justice, because that is where God is. Theodore Parker, the Unitarian minister, said "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice." We who believe in the power of love are called to hasten that bending toward justice, to give our hands and our hearts to the struggle, to help build that land the prophet describes, where justice shall roll down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream.

Amen.