

“Love is the Doctrine,”  
a sermon given by the Rev. Frank Clarkson  
at the Universalist Unitarian Church of Haverhill  
on October 11, 2009

Reading: From the essay “The Politics of Compassion,” by William Sloane Coffin, from his book *The Heart is a Little to the Left*:

I believe that when all’s said and done ... Jesus’ message remains incredibly simple, unbelievably beautiful, and as easy to translate into action as for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle.

Nowhere is this simple message more clearly stated than in the parable of the Good Samaritan... the one who showed mercy, who had compassion... was the heretic, the enemy, the man of wrong faith who did the right thing.

The culture of his time prevented Saint Paul from seeing many things, but the simplicity, beauty and difficulty of Jesus’ message was not one of them. He ends 1 Corinthians 13 with “And now abide faith, hope, love, these three. And the greatest of these is *love*.”

It’s not the unexamined life that is not worth living; it’s the uncommitted life. There is no smaller package in the world than that of a person all wrapped up in himself. Love is our business; if we can’t love, we’re out of business. And all this Christians learn primarily through the words and deeds of that “love divine all loves excelling, joy of heaven to earth come down.”

In short, love is the core value of the religious<sup>1</sup> life.

Sermon:

Every Sunday morning we say together the words of our affirmation of faith. It begins, “Love is the doctrine of this church, the quest for truth is its sacrament, and service is its prayer.” We say these words, but I wonder if we take the time to consider what they mean, and whether we are living them in our lives, as individuals and as a community. So for the next three weeks I’m going to preach on these three parts of our affirmation, and I hope that doing this will invite you to reflect on your own life and values, as well as our mission and purpose here in this church.

I don’t know how long we as a congregation has been using this affirmation of faith, but I suspect that it’s been a while. It’s written in our bylaws, article number two, right there at the start. Other congregations use it too, and I like it a lot. Not long ago, I was

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<sup>1</sup> I adapted Coffin’s reading to make it more inclusive--Coffin says “the Christian life.”

looking at the plaque on the back wall of the sanctuary, that came out of the Unitarian church in Haverhill, that building which is now the Armenian church just down the hill. That plaque lists the ministers of the Unitarian church and on it is a name I recognized. James Vila Blake, who was the minister there for two years, from 1867 to 1869, and he is the person credited with writing the words of our affirmation of faith. He went on to serve congregations in the Midwest for longer periods of time, but he is part of this congregation's history. It feels good to know that the words we say every Sunday were written by one of our own.

"Love is the doctrine of this church." What do you think that means? What is doctrine anyway? I like this definition--a belief or set of beliefs that are accepted as authoritative. That is, not constantly being revised, and or up for grabs. Doctrine describes what is central and essential about a church, it reflects who we are and who we aspire to be.

So what does it mean when we say "love is the doctrine?" That we are nice to each other? That we like one another? That this is a good place for dating?

Love is one of those mushy words that gets used a lot, but it's not always clear what it means. There's romantic love, when two people fall "in love." And there's love for things that make us happy, like, "I love to go fishing," or "I love chocolate."

I have a question for you young people: when your parents tell you, "I love you," what do you think they mean?

I heard a preacher one Sunday talking about becoming a father. One day he was in the baby's room, standing at the changing table changing his son's diaper, when his own father came in, and stood next to him, and put his arm around his shoulder. The elder man said to his son, "Now you know." "Now I know what?" the son replied, as he wrestled with the diaper. "Now you know how much I love you," his father said.

Have any of you ever said to your children or your spouse, "I love you, but I don't like you very much right now"? This is the kind of love I'm getting at--a deeper kind, that binds us together, even when it might be easier to go our separate ways. It is love as commitment and choice. It is more of a verb, an action word even, than a noun. It's something we do.

When I became a father, at times I felt as if my heart had been pulled out of my chest and had been put into that little creature that was going to be heading out into the world, beyond my ability, much of the time, to protect or control. Being a parent is a constant lesson in letting go. When my children would get on the bus for elementary school, I'd often say a silent prayer for them, and for the other kids going off to school. And that helped--it made me feel like I was handing them off, that they weren't going out there all alone.

I've shared with some of you a prayer that has been useful to me over the years. It comes from the Episcopal Book of Common Prayer, and it's called a prayer "for those we love."

Almighty God, we entrust all who are dear to us to your never-failing care and love, for this life and the life to come, knowing that you are doing for them better things than we can desire or pray for.

When I was doing hospital chaplaincy, I got in the habit of saying this prayer as I stood in the parking lot at the end of the day. It was my way of letting go of those people, for the night, handing them off to a higher power.

One of the sources of our faith (and they are printed in the order of service along with our principles) is "Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God's love by loving our neighbors as ourselves." In those traditions, which we are part of and where we come from, it is understood that we love one another because we have already been loved--we love one another because God loves us.

In my experience, this love is a companion that I am not always aware of, but that I trust is there all the time. A source or force that is with me, and with you, that is always on the side of justice, a Love that will not let us go. Of course, I can't prove it. And there are times that I have my doubts. But this faith helps me to lead a good and helpful and happy life.

The hymn we just sang, "Love divine, all loves excelling, joy of heaven, to earth come down," describes the theology behind our doctrine of love: that because we are loved, we are called to share that love, to reach out in care and concern for others. I picked today's reading from William Sloane Coffin because his life was such a testament to that love. As a prophetic Christian minister, he was constantly calling his own tradition to be true to its doctrine--to keep love at the center. He rightly saw how we can lose our way--how the church can become focused on its own preservation, and how people can seek their own narrow self-interest. We need to be reminded that we are not at the center, and that, as Coffin says, "the uncommitted life is not worth living." That "there is no smaller package in the world than that of a person all wrapped up in himself. Love is our business;" he says, "if we can't love, we're out of business ... in short, love is the core value of Christian (I'd expand that to say religious) life."

Coffin goes on to describe the difference between limited and unlimited love. He says, "Limited love can be very moving--a mother's love for her child, children's love for their parents. But when the neighbor to be loved has been limited to one of one's own people, the limited love, historically, has supported White supremacy, religious bigotry... limited love is often more self-serving than generous." Coffin continues, "Jesus, of course, was pressing ... for unlimited love, the love that is of God, the love you give when you make a gift of yourself, no preconditions."

When I hear some Christians saying homosexuality is a sin, I want to ask them, "Tell me what Jesus said about that." Because Jesus, as far as we know, never said a word about homosexuality at all. His life was not about rules or right belief, but standing with people who needed his love. And much of the time they were the people who were at the margins of the society. I have no doubt that if he was walking the earth today, he would be down on the Mall in Washington, standing with his people--our lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender sisters and brothers. He would be knocking on the door of the White House, telling President Obama that "don't ask, don't tell" is a travesty and needs to end, he would be on Capitol Hill, telling members of Congress that marriage doesn't need to be defended from gay people, he would be telling those of us who are heterosexual to have courage enough and love enough to be allies to LGBT folks, and to those of you who are gay, he would be saying, "I love you. And God loves you too, just as you are, because you are a child of God."

It's pretty easy to say, "Love is the doctrine of this church," on Sunday morning. It sounds nice, and looks good on paper under a pretty drawing of the church. But love in action can be hard. The kind of love we're talking about is not a narrow love reserved for people like us, but unlimited love--love for the stranger, for the one who annoys us, the one we don't yet understand.

How do we practice this? It might mean being a friend to the person in your class at school that the other kids like to pick on, because he or she is a little different. It might mean standing up for that person even when you feel scared to do so. It might mean putting aside an old grudge, and giving someone in your life a second chance. It might mean helping out someone in need--offering a kind word, or a warm meal, or the gift of your time and attention. It might mean standing up for a better world--using the power you do have to try and change things for the better. Mother Teresa said, "We cannot do great things on this earth. We can only do small things with great love." We won't do this all in the same way, but we are called to put love into action. It's good that we remind ourselves every Sunday that "love is the doctrine of this church." It's good that we say out it out loud, because it's not easy, this unlimited love. It is hard work, and lifelong work. And it's work we can't do alone--so it's good that we are in it together.

Acting out of love, trying to practice unlimited love, is the center of our life here. It's what we're meant to do. And I see you doing it, in many ways, already. I see you looking after one another, caring for each other, wondering how you can be of use. For that I am grateful. But even more, I am grateful that we are in this together, that we have this chance to love one another, to heal and bless our world. God loves you, and I love you too.

Amen.