

Summer Series: Love is My Religion
Sermon: "Love me, Love me Not"
July 23, 2017 – The Rev. Jan Reynolds

CALL TO WORSHIP

Life is the sacred mystery singing to itself,
And we are all that spirit,
Our stories all but one cosmic story
That we are love indeed.

That perfect love in me seeks the love in you,
And if our eyes could ever meet without fear
We would recognize each other and rejoice,
For love is life believing in itself.

--Manitongquat, Native American poet

AFFIRMATION

"When one has once fully entered the realm of love,
the world — no matter how imperfect —
becomes rich and beautiful,
it consists solely of opportunities for love."

- Soren Kierkegaard

SCRIPTURES

Song of Solomon 2:8-10

The voice of my beloved!
Look, he comes,
leaping upon the mountains,
bounding over the hills.
My beloved is like a gazelle
or a young stag.
Look, there he stands
behind our wall,
gazing in at the windows,
looking through the lattice.
My beloved speaks and says to me:
“Arise, my love, my fair one,
and come away...”

Leviticus 19:18

You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself.

Romans 12: 9-11

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 our God.

Hebrews 10:24

And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds.

Summer Series: Love is My Religion
Sermon: “Love me, Love me Not”
July 23, 2017 – The Rev. Jan Reynolds

In the Christian Tradition, we idolize Agape love. Agapē is the noblest word for love in the Greek language of the Christian Scriptures, mentioned more than 300 times. Agapē is not kindled by the merit or worth of its subject. Agape originates in its God-given nature. For God is love.

This Agape love delights in giving. This love keeps on loving even when the loved one is unresponsive, unkind, unlovable, and unworthy. Agapē desires only the good of the one loved. It is a fundamental desire for the well-being of others and acts of kindness flow from it.

Yet much of our early lives we spend chasing the love and limerence of Eros... that captivating feeling of being in-love. None of us would be here if it wasn't for Eros!

Eros is an overmastering passion that seizes the mind. It's based on body chemistry and seeks self-satisfaction. Though Eros is directed towards another, it has self in mind. For example: “I love you because you make me happy.” Eros looks for what it can receive. If it does give, it gives to receive. At Eros' best, we see the worth of the person before us in addition to seeing ourselves in our lovers' eyes.

The Song of Songs in the Hebrew Scriptures (also known as the Song of Solomon) has been a curiosity to Bible readers for millennia. There is no direct mention of God and we hear the voice of a sensuous female which has confounded uptight folks for eons.

To downplay the physicality in the verses, theological commentators began to read the Song as allegory: the Song of Songs is read as a love poem between Israel's God and the people, or later, Christ's love for his church. But modern interpreters have tended to recover the Song's historical sense. It is read now as a literal poem of sexual expression and longing for the garden.¹ Perhaps the Song of Songs reflects an innocent delight in Creation where mutual sexual attraction is free of violence, commerce, coercion, or manipulation.

The language of Song of songs reminds us of Being in Love! Pretty marvelous.

Yet, we don't need social scientists to tell us that the life span of the “in-love” phase of love is short. In fact, they do say that the average life span of this “in love” phenom on is two years. Some of us would say much shorter! Then we come off the emotional high, euphoria evaporates

¹ <http://www.kerux.com/doc/0802A3.asp> - What Should I Read on the Song of Solomon? James T. Dennison, Jr.

and we discover that we are not in fact lovers. Love Me, Love me Not. Eros love is fickle love. And when it dries up, Humans are often on to another target for our infatuation.

Gary Chapman, who authored a series of books on the practicalities of love, wrote, "After the initial love, euphoria is often replaced with hurt, anger, disappointment or fear. We find we are self-centered people who have made promises to one another that we are incapable of keeping."

Over time, in love partnerships, we become irritated by the very attributes we were once attracted to. We begin to take for granted the presence of our loved one, and close them out emotionally over time.

God's love as we see enacted through Jesus is full in unconditional agape love. And it is also particular to the person. We look at how God addressed Moses, or Zachias in the tree, or Mary Magdalene, or the woman at the well. Jesus was well aware of their particular soft spots, their particular flaws and eccentricities. He had compassion for their failings and their fears, and encouraged them in their particularity.

When we look at how we first "fall in-love" with a person or a community, we are aware of the particularly qualities that attract us. We want what they have and we do not. Their unique collection of attributes helps balance our own.

Harville Hendrix who writes about how to transform lackluster marriages, writes, "Romantic Love delivers us into the passionate arms of someone who will ultimately trigger the same frustrations we had with our parents, but for the best possible reason! Doing so brings our childhood wounds to the surface so they can be healed."²

I officiated at a wedding yesterday of a couple in their late 50's. They have their eyes open in this second round, they have a clear idea of how their respective strengths shore each other up.

Over time, when people hang in there, Eros Love transforms into what the Greeks called storgē love (pronounced "store-gay"). You may not be aware of storgē, but you do it all the time. Storgē is an affectionate love, the type of love one might have for family or a spouse. It is a naturally occurring, unforced type of love. This kind of love is what a sister and brother, child, grandparent shares. Like phileo (friendship love), there are strong abiding feelings extended into acts of love.

A compound form of storgē is found in Romans 12: 9-11: "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

² Harville Hendrix, Making Marriage Simple: Ten Truths for Changing the Relationship You Have into the One You Want

honor.” In this verse, the Greek word translated "love" is *philostorgos*, putting together *phileo* and *storgē*. Friendship and family love combined.

Many examples of family love are found in Scripture, such as the love and mutual protection among Noah and his wife, their sons and daughters-in-law in Genesis; the love of Jacob for his sons; and the strong love the sisters Martha and Mary in the gospels had for their brother Lazarus.

I attended a Marin Interfaith Council retreat at Green Gulch Zen Center recently. The retreat was given by Rob McClellan, pastor at Westminster Presbyterian, and Lauren Van Ham, Dean of the Interfaith Chaplaincy in Berkeley. Lauren implored us to extend our love to all of creation. She referred to all birds and animals as our relatives... and asked us to look upon them with affection. We may not understand creatures, but we co-exist with them, and love them. This is a form of *storgē* love that reveres the promise of its subject, not having to identify with them to love them.

Choosing to view people or animals through a lens of goodwill makes all the difference to our relationships.

Gary Chapman, who wrote several books about the practicality of loving, says that the main characteristics of a good marriage – in the *storgē* phase of the rest of our lives – are kindness, patience, forgiveness, courtesy, humility, giving and honesty. The self-giving persistent work of love!

At the top of the list in importance, says Chapman, is kindness, loving kindness... Small acts of kindness in everyday life save marriages, family and community relationships. We recognize the other person's needs, whether we understand them or not, and want to put those needs above our own. Not in a self-destructive way, but to seriously take other's desires into consideration.

That means being alert to the way our partner perceives love. We do things to please the other out of an attitude of kindness. And appreciate the way the other person shows love to us in their own way.

We think we know the people we love, but sometimes we are on autopilot, or interpret the other person through our own eyes.

How about asking these questions to your spouse or family member?

What actions would demonstrate best that I love you?

What can I do to help you?

What is one idea you have for me to be a better spouse/sister/brother/parent?

What do I do that you wish I would stop?

In his last book "Passion Before Prudence," our dear friend Dick Gray wrote about commitment

as being the Mother of Meaning. He writes about a love that is inspired by God's love for us. He writes that love is unconditional and permanent, and love is also particular.

Dick Gray says that is commitment and accountability that give meaning to life; we enact our love through our specific awareness and attention to the particularity of a person.

As Dick writes, "I remember in the 1960's a student organization called the Student nonviolent coordinating committee. I met some of its members and there was no doubt they loved humanity. But I learned that some of them, at least, had a really difficult time relating to individuals. Love is not like that. If you can't love an individual, how are you going to love humanity in general?"

This last week, I was at the national training for the IAF, the parent organization of the Marin Organizing Committee. All ages, races, religious traditions. A Muslim woman in hijab from London. An African-Hispanic American 19-year-old from Baltimore. White middle age ladies like me. And many personalities... some outgoing and defiant, others thoughtful and introspective. But overall there was an appreciation for the undergirding of love between us, as well as the delight in each individual.

A marriage, family or community group that survives the temptation to fragment after the initial "honeymoon period" of affection, begins to know that they are accountable to one another. They commit that they will hang in there and work things out. That, with all the exasperation we may feel at times, we aren't going anywhere.

Hebrews 10:24 suggests that we "consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds." When we are committed to our family, or an organization, we hang in there with them, we may even provoke one another to love and to act from our love. We call one another out and get each other back on track.

I feel that here with all of you. There is an unconditional, spontaneous love where there is an outpouring of joy in our presence together, but also knowing that we see each other with all our particular traits and personalities. Overtime, we get a sense of what we each need, to know that we are loved and cared for. You've been through some difficult times as a congregation and certainly over the decades you have each as individuals been through the trials of life and loss. There is a reason we refer to our congregations as "families" - through the years, religious communities experience together that *storgē* love.

...The love that long time married couples know, that families know: in all our particularities, we are united and committed to one another, with deep affection.

As we strive for a radical self-giving Agape love that extends to all humanity, may we also be sustained and fulfilled by a love that feeds each of us in our families, marriages, friendships and communities. There is great value in our long-term partnerships! Through our communal growth, we contribute to nothing less than societal transformation.