

## ***What Does Love Demand?***

Unitarian Universalist Church of Vancouver

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### ***Reflection on the Theme by Tom Shindell***

When Rev. Kathryn asked me to “tweak” a previous talk I had given at First Unitarian Universalist Church of Austin, I was surprised. My talk was about the intersection of spirituality and sexuality. But then I began thinking...which is always dangerous for those around me. Actually, it does lend itself to connecting love and I hope to share that with you now.

I was raised as a Roman Catholic by a very devout mother. She stuck to the catholic party line which was, “It is okay if you are gay - you just can’t be in a relationship.” Certainly, a very great example of connecting love, right? Oh my. What a dilemma. What to do?

I decided that I would do my best to be a good catholic and to be the best loving person I could be - both to my mom and whomever I tried to have a relationship with. I tried to be in this impossible, fictitious, unrealistic, and spiritually arid, intersection. I took care of my mom for almost 20 years as she struggled with Systemic Lupus. Eventually, my mother died. Then the most amazing thing happened when I walked into her room right after she passed.

As I entered her room, I was suddenly aware of the presence of God in the room. I clearly, clearly, heard an inner voice - who I just knew was God - and it very clearly said to me that, “Your Mom is okay and she is here with me. I am only about two things - love and forgiveness - and that is what I want you to do. I don’t really care about all the man-made rules about sex, sexuality, abortion, etc. I am only about love and forgiveness.”

I was dumbfounded, relieved, and I immediately snapped back to reality to begin to deal with my mother’s passing. It was literally years later that I eventually went into therapy and learned so many things about myself, my relationship to God, to the catholic church, and what was right for me.

Most importantly, I began to view love and connecting love differently. As I could talk about this all morning, here is the cliff notes version. It took me several years and many tries to find the correct, supportive, nurturing, and affirming intersection of spirituality and sexuality. A place where I could be my authentic self. It also took me several years and many tries to understand what a truly loving relationship is between people and more importantly, what connecting love is all about.

The closest and best fit I have found is here - in a UU church. Both in Austin and now in Vancouver. You - all of you - are a part of my spiritual intersection. There has never been a spiritual environment in which I have felt both so empowered and welcomed. I can be in the choir, on the settled minister search committee, a lay leader on Sundays, I can be a pastoral care associate - and I can do it all authentically.

You now see a living example of a truly authentic intersection of spirituality and sexuality. What you also see is someone who has learned that connecting love is just that - a love that connects you to your best self, your highest self, your most loving self, and your most forgiving self.

It is the authentic love that goes beyond the “small” things like leaving socks on the floor or leaving dishes in the sink and it truly focuses on “big” things like have you told those important to you that you

love them, have you told someone you are sorry, have you forgiven someone, have you helped someone grow and develop, or have you helped someone find comfort and peace in personal turmoil.

These are merely some examples of connecting love - or as Rev. Kathryn calls it - love with a capital "L" versus a lower case "l." I have been challenged, as many of us have been, to learn to forgive harms and injustices that befall us all.

When I heard God clearly speak softly that love and forgiveness is all that matters - it changed my life. It allowed me to transition from care giving and sublimating my needs - little "l" love - to loving in a way that is empowering, nurturing, and integrating - capital "L" love.

Thank you all for being a part of my intersection and more importantly, for participating in the journey we are all on to learn, share, and promote connecting love, God's love.

### ***What Does Love Demand?*© by Rev. Kathryn A. Bert**

In this culture of separation, it is a radical act to acknowledge the love which connects us, to know in our bodies, that we never walk alone.

"If love were the central practice of a new generation of organizers and spiritual leaders, it would have a massive impact," says Adrienne Maree Brown.

It's hard to connect with love in a world that is so full of fear and hate.

In fact, I have to admit that my first thought when we entered February, was not love again! This will be the third month we've studied love as a theological theme – beginning with *Delight* in September, *Agápē* in December and now *Connecting Love* in February.

Love seems so banal, so trite, in the midst of this new administration repealing executive orders that end at least a dozen measures supporting racial equity and combating discrimination against LGBTQ-identifying people, and issuing executive orders – well, so many executive orders. I don't think I have to outline them here – they've been all over the news.

When I want to disregard *love* as a possible response, I remember the words of Martin Luther King Jr – "it is an absolute necessity for the survival of our civilization. Yes, it is love that will save our world and our civilization, love even for enemies." This was from a sermon on loving your enemies from 1957.

Using Matthew 5:43-45 as his text, King emphasizes that "hate for hate only intensifies the existence of hate and evil in the universe. . . . The strong person is the person who can cut off the chain of hate, the chain of evil. . . . and inject within the very structure of the universe that strong and powerful element of love."

King went on to say "Now let me hasten to say that Jesus was very serious when he gave this command; he wasn't playing. He realized that it's hard to love your enemies. He realized that it's difficult to love those persons who seek to defeat you, those persons who say evil things about you. He realized that it was painfully hard, pressingly hard. But he wasn't playing. And we cannot dismiss this passage as just

another example of Oriental hyperbole, just a sort of exaggeration to get over the point. Because Jesus wasn't playing; because he was serious." End quote.

And there's a reason that the Golden Rule also appears in Buddhism and Hinduism, Judaism and Islam and Paganism – love is central to this being human, and the ancients understood this, and the wisdom traditions teach it. They teach it not because it is banal and trite, they teach it because salvific and necessary to our survival.

And I'm setting aside here the fact that I've been trying to teach you all the Platinum Rule, which is – *do unto others as they would want done unto themselves*, because we don't all wish to be treated the same way, but the Golden Rule is perhaps a first step. Maybe we should talk about the Precious Metal Rules – platinum and gold – which describe what it is Love Demands of Us.

Universalists equated God with Love, describing God's love as so big as to include and encompass everyone. I hear that God in Tom's experience following his mother's death – the words, "I am only about two things - love and forgiveness - and that is what I want you to do. ...I am only about love and forgiveness....Connecting love is a love that connects you to your best self, your highest self, your most loving self, and your most forgiving self," he told us.

Last week I addressed loving our bodies as an antidote to the body shame our culture teaches and depends upon – the shame which keep us apart, wallowing in isolation and separation and believing the lie of a supremacy culture which depends upon a hierarchy of oppressions – pitting my pain against yours, my body's safety against your body's safety. When the truth is that we are connected, not separate, and that my liberation is absolutely tied up in yours.

Love demands of us healing – healing ourselves and our world, and it is painfully hard, pressingly hard – and we don't have any time to put it off. "My friend bleated for all he was worth, and they cut his throat," writes Lynn Ungar. We must make room for repentance in our hearts. We no longer have time for scapegoating.

That we are interconnected is one of the truths that mystics and religious leaders have been trying to teach us forever – to this atomized, individualized culture where we take everything personally. This interdependent fact our existence, once truly known and felt – leads us toward healing, because there is no one person or thing to blame or scapegoat, there is just us, doing our best, often failing, causing one another pain from our own wounds, and just asleep enough to not be aware of the damage we do. To awaken to the damage we do is painful, but also healing because then we can begin to do things differently and work toward healing.

Our work is to heal a traumatized people and world. We were traumatized well before this most recent election, well before the pandemic, but the awareness of the trauma that undergirded our society was awakened for many by the events of 2020, the pandemic and the murder of George Floyd and so many others, the most recent election and now the executive orders coming at us fast and furious.

We must not lose focus – we must not get distracted by the noise – and chase down every rabbit hole in every direction. Find your thing. Find your one thing. Do it. Stay focused. Ask what Love demands of you in this moment, and do that. Not the easy thing, not the shiny thing, but the loving thing, the hard thing, the important thing.

And practice your spiritual discipline, whatever that is. If you meditate, meditate. If you exercise, exercise. If you read, read. If you knit or make music, knit and make music. Practice those things that ground you, and learn new ways to ground and heal and center. Because the world needs you, and the world needs you whole and loving and connected. Find this love that connects you to your best self, your highest and most loving and forgiving self. Seek it out and rest in it, because the work is hard and you'll need your best self to show up for it.

I feel like I just got a little preachy there. On the one hand, it drives me nuts that the word *preaching* has become synonymous with vapid and condescending speech. probably bugs me because you pay me to preach, among other things. On the other hand, I do try to avoid being *preachy* in my preaching. My favorite line from Jane Austen, which I know I've shared with you before, something the character Anne in *Persuasion* says about her conversation with Captain Benwick: "Nor could she help feeling, on more serious reflection, that, like many other great moralists and preachers, she had been eloquent on a point in which her own conduct would ill bear examination."

The truth is, I've been off-center of late, and being hard on myself about being off-center, about not remembering to meditate, not taking care of myself as I deserve. When I did return to my meditation practice after a few days absence, this enormous wave of grief came up for me and I had a big ole cry – ugly-face, tantrum-cry like I've not had in years. Apparently, that was what I needed, because after that cry session, I've been more gentle with myself and loving and forgiving. It's like Tom's inner voice, God, spoke to me and said *I am only about two things - love and forgiveness - and that is what I want you to do.*

Once I forgave myself for being off-center, I remembered *why* I am off-center! Of course I am off center! Not only is this new administration attacking people everywhere, people I love and hold dear, but by talking about body shame last week, I surfaced my own feelings of shame which is exactly what this culture depends upon to maintain the hierarchy...

*How the Word is Passed* is a book by Clint Smith, I highly recommend, and there's a passage in there which better explains the point I just tried to make. What you need to know is that this book is an exploration of the legacy of slavery and its imprint on centuries of American history. With that context in mind, he writes,

"I thought of my primary and secondary education. I remembered feeling crippling guilt as I silently wondered why every enslaved person couldn't simply escape like Douglass, Tubman, and Jacobs had. I found myself angered by the stories of those who did not escape. Had they not tried hard enough? Didn't they care enough to do something? Did they choose to remain enslaved? This, I now realize, is part of the insidiousness of white supremacy; it illuminates the exceptional in order to implicitly blame those who cannot, in the most brutal circumstances, attain superhuman heights. It does this instead of blaming the system, the people who built it, the people who maintained it. In overly mythologizing our ancestors, we forget an all-too-important reality: the vast majority were ordinary people, which is to say they were people just like everyone else. This ordinariness is only shameful when used to legitimate oppression. This is its own quiet violence."

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All this side note is just to say that though my words may have *sounded* preachy, it was only because you didn't yet know what I knew – in my body – that what I was asking is incredibly hard these days.

My own conduct would ill bear examination, but I can be eloquent on that point. Just like other moralists and preachers, I am eloquent because I am learning, because I have yet to embody the lessons I know to teach.

I am reminding myself to not lose focus, to not get distracted, to practice what grounds me, and discover new ways of grounding, as much as I am recommending those strategies to you. This is what love demands of us in this moment.

“If love were the central practice of a new generation of organizers and spiritual leaders, it would have a massive impact,” says Adreienne Maree Brown. “If the goal was to increase the love, rather than winning or dominating a constant opponent, I think we could actually imagine liberation from constant oppression. We would suddenly be seeing everything we do, everyone we meet, not through the tactical eyes of war, but through eyes of love.”

The Rev. Nathan Hollister, a UU minister, activist and community organizer, says that we don't yet have the Big Story we are trying to create, and that this is a part of the problem. The pre-requisites for peace and justice do not yet exist. We need to develop spiritual practices of interdependence and solidarity, and we need to create a Big Story that is not steeped in white supremacy culture. It is through black writers like Isabel Wilkerson, Adreinne Maree Brown, Clint Smith and Ross Gay that I am understanding just how deeply this culture defines us, but honestly, it is through white authors like Jane Austen, too. Because the systems of domination and hierarchy, kyriarchy – a word I've just learned – these white supremacist principles and characteristic are so present in Austen's writings with the clear and unalterable station in life each character inhabits, and social rules of engagement and that critical wit and biting humor I love, which is not, in the least bit, loving. It's actually quite cruel. And it causes me to think about the everyday cruelty we participate in....and the why of it, how it serves to maintain the hierarchy. If I can point out your flaw, then I might feel better about myself, for a moment. That's the trap that's been set. That's the myth of individualism, the Big Story we inherited, that only the exceptional are worthy, and that it's our own damn fault if we don't succeed or win or survive. We need to develop spiritual practices of interdependence and solidarity, and we need to create a Big Story that is not steeped in white supremacy culture.

“If love were the central practice of a new generation of organizers and spiritual leaders, it would have a massive impact,” says Adreienne Maree Brown. That's something we can start right here and right now, make love our central practice. These precious metal rules – the Golden Rule and the even more valuable, Platinum Rule, these are what love demands of us: That we treat others as we would like to be treated, when we are loving ourselves, and that we even make the effort to treat others as they would wish to be treated when they are loving themselves. Jesus was serious about this point, as was the Buddha, and Muhammed and the other great teachers of humanity. “When we are loving, then we do not hurt other people or cause them pain, we wish for others what we wish for ourselves, and we love our neighbors as ourselves.” May it be so.