

Sermon: A Definition for the Word “Love”

Sunday, February 20, 2022, at Unitarian Universalist Society of Sacramento
Guest Preacher: Rev. Lori Johnson Ortiz, 1st Congregational Church of Martinez

Readings: from All about Love: New Visions and Gospel of Matthew 22:34-40 (printed at end)

Sermon by Rev. Lori Ortiz

In her the opening of her book, *All About Love: New Visions* author bell hooks argues that love should be used more as verb than noun. Loving as process: an ongoing act. bell hooks also proposes that if we are going to have revelatory discourse about about the verb ‘to love’ we might begin well by choosing a core definition.

bell hooks affirms that finding a good working definition of love was no easy task. After much research, she settled on one influenced by the work of scholar Eric Fromm and presented by M. Scott Peck in the 1978 book *The Road Less Traveled*:

That definition for the word ‘love’ goes like this:

“The will to extend one’s self for the purpose of nurturing one’s own or another’s spiritual growth.”

I love this definition of love. I do for many reasons which are continuously revealed to me. No the least of which is because it validates love for self as well as well as love of other.

It’s full of choice and action

willing

extending

nurturing

and for what purpose?

my own or another’s spiritual growth.

“The will to extend one’s self for the purpose of nurturing one’s own or another’s spiritual growth.”

This is loving. It is applicable to everyone: friend, lover, child, stranger, and perhaps most revolutionary of all: to self.

In this first volume of her “Love Song to the Nation” bell hooks shares and examines some of her own experiences in partnership love, what you might call also romantic love.

In asking the question “What is Love?” bell hooks also critiques what she terms ‘society’s failure to provide a model for learning to love’.

Both her question and critique resonate with me. Indeed, what is love? How do we come to fully appreciate how much love gives to us and how much love requires of us to give? Poetry and song and scriptures contain clues, but many of us begin working on love’s mystery without having anything like full set of clues.

In spite of my own lack of clues, I count myself lucky on the partnership love front. I met my beloved when I was 22 and married him 5 years later. Dave and I have been together for 37 years now, and I could not ask for a better friend and partner. Love is still a mystery, but it is indeed

good to have a partner challenging me with questions, helping me with the work of chasing down the clues. It's good to have someone who can hear their partner of 25 years say out of the blue, "Hey, babe, I think I know what I want to do now. I want to go to seminary."

Returning to our working definition of love, that clue that bell hooks held up for us: The will to extend one's self suggests that to love is the work at hand.

And in spite of any modern cultural insistence that love is happily-ever-after easy, most of us discover that love is indeed work.

Good, hard work.

Work that we are called to do for ourselves and for others.

But what is it that draws us into this work? What is that makes us willing to extend ourselves for spiritual growth either our own or anyone else's?

The implicit and explicit messages of my Northern California 1960's and 70's growing-up years said to me that I should attend to my own mental and physical growth but there was very little mention of spiritual growth. Some kids I knew went regularly to church or synagogue and I envied them a little. Did they talk about God there? I wondered about God but rarely found any conversation partners. My parents had a few friend that were into meditation but as a family we did not go to church or pray or meditate or engage in anything that looked outwardly like spiritual discipline. What my family of origin could and did do for me though was make me feel loved, and for that I am so grateful.

I cannot know, of course, if childhood spiritual communities or practices would have helped or harmed my spiritual growth long-term. It's hard to say where in our cultural contexts we as individuals may expect to receive good models for learning to love: the kind of love that values spiritual growth alongside mental and physical growth.

As it happened for me, I was in my 30s before I began to actively practice any kind of attention to my spiritual well being and it sort of happened by accident.

It had begun to occur to me by then that human beings are a synergistic trinity of body, mind and spirit.

And then I found something that gave me real-time, real-life experience of that idea:

I got a job sanding floors.

It seems a little odd even to me to be standing here, telling you that the work of restoring old wooden floors has been and continues to be restorative to my body, mind and soul. Of course, maybe you don't think its odd at all. any spiritual traditions lift up the work our our hands, and the physical exertion of our bodies as a path to meditation, contemplation or prayer.

I did not know then that floor sanding would turn out to be a path to my own spiritual growth, I was just excited to get a gig helping to restore vintage architecture. It was my first job in the trades, then as now a male dominated industry. But I was lucky again in my trainers: two women who were willing to extend themselves for another's spiritual growth. They chose to be my teachers, vesting their interest in making me the best wood floor restorationist I could be.

Slowly, incrementally under their care, I began to build my skills until one day when I could feel myself relaxing into the roar of the sanding machines, slipping into a meditative state that became as restorative to me as it was to the floors.

Floor sanding became my first meditation practice, a practice that continues support my spiritual well being today. There was a gap of a few years when I tried other kinds ways of earning a

living but in the end I joyfully returned to the satisfying work of wood floor restoration, opening my own little artisan business in 2006.

I had stumbled on a practice of mediation in my working life that continues to nurture my spiritual growth, but as it turned out, that would not be enough.

Outside my own family circle, I was rarely extending myself for the purpose of nurturing anyone else's spiritual growth, and my own spirit began to suffer. I felt cut off—without connectedness to wider community.

Then, I got lucky again: I am an alcoholic.

It was a disease I thought I had licked, but during those few years I had left floor sanding work for corporate software marketing, it roared back awake.

Shortly after my 40th birthday, in both fear and desperation, I joined my very first spiritual community: the recovery community known as Alcoholics Anonymous.

The singular healing purpose of AA groups all over the world, is responsibility for reaching out to the person who still suffers with the disease of alcoholism. When I first read bell hooks "All About Love" a few years ago, the definition of love she employed resonated with me. Everything I had learned about loving as modeled in AA individual and group work could serve as a dictionary example under the verb "to love".

With an understanding that alcoholism is a disease of isolation, individuals unite in group settings to practice becoming willing to regularly reach for their own AND another's spiritual growth.

One simple AA example is called the responsibility prayer and it goes like this:

"I am Responsible. When anyone, anywhere, reaches out for help, I want the hand of A.A. always to be there. And for that: I am responsible."

At five years sober, with my spirit healing along with my mind and body, I went looking for wider, deeper connectedness to others. In an old church building walking distance from my house, I found a new community. The people of the First Congregational Church of Martinez witnessed my baptism and supported my spiritual growth in community in countless ways. Models for learning to love came in many ways potlucks and fellowship and music and service projects. There I also first began to hear on a regular basis, the ancient Jewish and Christian scriptures which I came to think of as love letters from spiritual ancestors who left a legacy that said: *This was what life was like for us, here is how we experienced the presence of God, here is how we failed and succeeded and learned. We hope this helps. Love ya.*

I was honored today to read one of those scriptural love letters because it is for me central source material for ongoing spiritual growth. These words form for me a starting place for my work in the world: the work of reaching in love for our own and our neighbor's spiritual growth. Reading again the words from the Gospel of Matthew known as the 'Greatest commandment':

He said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment.

And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'

I feel certain that Jesus the teacher and healer knew that a commandment to love would have to be taught and obeyed first because all healing and restoration could flow only from the source

called love. And that the source called love flowed from actively cultivating relationship with ourselves, with others in our neighborhood and with God of many names. That has been my experience through seminary, chaplaincy and through serving as a member of two spiritual communities my local AA meetings and my local UCC church.

Today, at 19 years sober, I am preparing for my first Lenten season as a church pastor. Like most things in Christian tradition, actively participating in the spiritual discipline of Lent is still pretty new to me. One of the earliest practices I chose for myself was made possible by my paternal Grandfather the Rev. Warren H. Johnson, who among other things, served his call as a US Navy Chaplain. In 2017 on the occasion of his 100th birthday, my Grandpa Johnson, passed into my keeping, a wooden box made by a ship's carpenter (on the USS Breckenridge). Inside the box there are 90 envelopes each containing one of his type-written sermons with lots of margin notes and several old church bulletins indicating the many places where he had preached that particular sermon. In 2018, my Lenten practice was to read and reflect on one of the sermons each day for 40 days.

Grandpa died at the age of 103 in the summer of 2020, but he continues to be my scriptural conversation partner through the legacy of his box of sermons. Through a reminder from my friend Rev Roger. I plan to honor this ongoing conversation once again by reading a sermon a day for my 2022 Lenten practice.

In closing, today, I would like to share with you a line from one Rev. Warren's sermons. entitled the "Force of Love"

According to his notes, he first preached this sermon in August of 1941 when Hitler's military were well underway causing death and devastation in Europe backed by very different forces: the poisonous forces of hate. After reflecting on the forces at play in that time and place the young, not-quite-yet ordained Warren Johnson quoted: "Jesus alone founded his empire on Love" The force of Love. Amen.

First Reading:

This reading is from *All about Love: New Visions* by bell hooks, first published in 2000. This is the first volume in her series called “Love Song to the Nation.” bell hooks is the pen name of Gloria Jean Watkins, American author, professor, feminist and social activist. bell hooks was a powerful voice for positive social transformation. Her first major work was “*Ain’t I a Woman?: Black Women and Feminism*” published in 1981. She was born in Kentucky in 1952 and died just this last December at the age of 69.

“When I was a young girl, I would lie in my attic bed and talk endlessly with divine spirit about the nature of love. Then, I did not imagine I would ever have the courage to speak about love without the solitary covering of secrecy or night. Like Jacob, wandering alone by the stream, in the stillness of my pitch-dark room I grappled with the metaphysics of love, seeking to understand love’s mystery. That grappling continued until my awareness intensified and a new vision of love came to me. Now I recognize that I was engaged from then until now in a disciplined spiritual practice—opening the heart. It led me to become a devout seeker on love’s path—to talk with angels unafraid.”

Second Reading

Gospel of Matthew 22:34-40

34 When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, **35** and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. **36** “Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” **37** He said to him, “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ **38** This is the greatest and first commandment. **39** And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ **40** On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”