

All You Need Is...

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Readings

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A disciple asked Rabbi Schmelke, "We are commanded to love our neighbor as ourself. How can I do this if my neighbor has wronged me?"

The rabbi answered, "You must understand these words correctly. Love your neighbor is something which you yourself are. For all souls are one. Each is a spark from the original soul, and this soul is inherent in all souls, just as your soul is in all members of your body. It may happen, [in the midst of a difficult task], that your hand makes a mistake and hits you. But would you then take a stick and punish your hand because it lacked understanding, and so increase your pain? It is the same if your neighbor, who is of one soul with you, wrongs you because he does not understand. If you punish him, you only hurt yourself.

From an article in the current [Sojourners Magazine](#) by Bill Moyers in which he calls for a renewal of prophetic Christianity:

Over the past few years, as the poor got poorer, the health care crisis worsened, wealth and media became more and more concentrated, and our political system was bought out from under us, prophetic Christianity lost its voice. The Religious Right drowned everyone else out.

And they hijacked Jesus...

Let's get Jesus back.

But let's do it in love. I know it can sound banal and facile to say this. The word "love" gets thrown around too casually these days. And brute reality can mock the whole idea of loving one another. We're still living in the shadow of Dachau and Buchenwald. The smoke still rises above Kosovo and Rwanda, Chechnya and East Timor. The walls of Abu Ghraib still shriek of pain. What has love done? Where is

there any real milk of human kindness?

But the love I mean is the love described by Reinhold Niebuhr in his book of essays *Justice and Mercy*, where he writes: "When we talk about love we have to become mature or we will become sentimental. Basically love means...being responsible, responsibility to our family, toward our civilization, and now by the pressures of history, toward the universe of humankind."

What I'm talking about will be hard, devoid of sentiment and practical as nails. But love is action, not sentiment. When the church was young and fair, and people passed by her doors, they did not comment on the difference or the doctrines. Those stern and taciturn pagans said of the Christians: "How they love one another!" It started that way soon after the death of Jesus. His disciple Peter said to the first churches, "Above all things, have unfailing love toward one another." I looked in my old Greek concordance the other day. That word "unfailing" would be more accurately rendered "intense."

We are called to do what we can...to get America back on the track. St. Augustine shows us how: "One loving soul sets another on fire." But to move beyond sentimentality, what begins in love must lead on to justice. We are called to the fight of our lives.

The living tradition which we share draws from Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God's love by loving our neighbors as ourselves.

This is our last Sunday service in this sanctuary. As we reflect on the overflowing generosity of the St. Stephen's Episcopal congregation over the time that we've been here, as we give thanks for the strong friendship that has grown up between our two communities, I find it appropriate that we are also engaging a piece of our common heritage in Jewish and Christian teachings. And what a powerful heritage it is!

Now it is not an easy task to describe the influence of anything as wide-ranging and voluminous as "Jewish and Christian teachings" in a single sentence. (If it *was* so simple, I would have a few seminary professors that I would need to contact...and maybe request a refund on seminary tuition). But the words of this source, in attempting to extract the core teaching...I gotta say, these Unitarian Universalists did a pretty good job from my perspective. The teachings call us *to respond to God's love by loving our neighbors as ourselves*. In all of my study of the Jewish and Christian scriptures, and keeping in mind William Ellery Channing's admonition to look for the preponderance of evidence, I would say that they do...undoubtedly. But what does that mean, exactly? Like the disciple of Rabbi Schmelke in the reading, we ask, "How do I love the neighbor who has wronged me?" Like the disciples of Jesus we ask, "Who is my neighbor, anyway?"

Ah, now we've reached the difficulty. You see, this is one of those sermons I looked forward to in anticipation. The words of the source seemed so full of possibility, so rich with relevance...and as the

day of writing (also known as the day of reckoning) grew closer, that anticipation turned to fear. Love? What can I possibly say about love? It's so huge...It's so important...It's so incredibly murky when you get right down to defining it, and yet so crucial, central, indispensable to what we know as human life... Where do I begin?

So, my first tactic, (and one you will become familiar with, if you're not already) was to turn to popular music, lyrics, song titles. It struck me that there used to be more songs about love. I don't mean the graphic lust of rap, or the cheesy romance of easy listening, or the broken hearts of country music, or the dark, obsessive ballads of alternative music...I mean a wider view of love, love for the world, for your neighbors, for your *enemies*, even. Love, not as a distraction from the problems of the world, but as a *response* to the problems of the world; not as escape from harsh realities, but as an *engagement* with those realities. Some of you can fill in the blanks here:

What the World Needs Now Is....

All You Need Is....

C'mon people now, smile on your brother, everybody get together, try to love one another right now.

These songs, however they might appear from our current vantage point, were not about love for one other person but about love as a way of being that could lead to real, societal change.

But I haven't heard any of those songs recently. These days, it's hard not to be a little embarrassed about using the word "love". The very idea of love changing the world has become a "golden oldie" along with the songs of the past. It seems naïve; sappy; we've maybe accepted the fact that we'll hear about it in church, it's certainly a nice idea, but...the truth is, now we are more apt to ask, along with the title of a Tina Turner song: What's Love Got To Do With It? Or a question that I was asked after a previous social action forum: "So do you think we can change Wal-Mart with love?"

And I took that question home with me and I've thought about it many times since. It seemed absurd on the face of it, to believe that love could change Wal-Mart's business practices. Naïve. But while it's understandable that we might pass off the sentiments of a few starry-eyed, privileged songwriters of a more idealistic time as naïve...can we say the same of Jesus? The Hebrew Prophets? Gandhi? Martin Luther King? These, after all, were not folks who were insulated from the harsh realities of life. They were not singing about love as a way to fit in with the times. They, in the midst of oppression and persecution and violence and injustice, were offering what they had come to know as a practical response to *all* of life...love. If we are embarrassed to talk about it now, if it doesn't sound sophisticated enough, politically savvy, realistic, practical, it may be because we have lost sight of what love *is*.

One thing the words of this source tell me is that love is a *response*. The action of loving is a call and response. There is only one natural response to being loved, and that is to love. Jesus was intent on opening people up to feel the love of God, not so that they could be assured an individual spot in heaven,

but so that they could then love others. Love one another as I have loved you, he said. Love is a response to love. (And where did this all begin, you scientific types are asking. If love is *always* a response to love, where did loving start. To which I respectfully reply, it doesn't matter to me. Call it God, call it the Universe, call it the Big Bang of Love. Our mission is to keep it going, to love one another and experience the exponential power of the response, to pass it on and by so doing renew ourselves in love yet again).

Now I know, that still sounds very pie-in-the-sky. "Love and watch it grow." And yet, I believe (and I'm not alone) that it can (and *does*) grow. But if it is to happen, we have to get past the notion that the love we are talking about here is a *feeling* that will drop down upon us. That we must wait for the *urging* of love before we can act upon it. Love is *not* a feeling. "You shall love your neighbor as yourself," it says in Leviticus 19:18. In the notes to that passage in the Harper Collins Study Bible it says, "Love, here, is not an emotion."

But what *is* it, then? Not surprisingly, I found a myriad of answers, but many share a fundamental similarity. Love is a *practice*, according to Thich Nhat Hanh. Love, said Erich Fromm, is an *art*. Any art that we hope to achieve some proficiency in requires practice and hard work. Love, [writes Bill Moyers](#), is *action*, not sentiment, and he cites theologian Reinhold Niebuhr talking about responsibility toward our family, our civilization, the universe of humankind. [Granny D talks in a recent article](#) about the "politics of love" in which each individual is nourished to rise to their full potential, benefitting the whole of society. One thing is clear, according to these thinkers: love is about what we *do* in the everyday, pay-the-bills, punch-the-clock, routine, bottom-line, this-is-real-life, world.

Erich Fromm points out the absurdity of a painter who never paints, saying that he is only awaiting the perfect object that will inspire him, and then he will paint perfectly. But in order to know how to paint, one must paint. The art does not arise from an object, but from our own practice, and so shines through the object of any single painting. And so it is with love. "If I truly love one person," writes Fromm, "I love all persons, I love the world, I love life. If I can say to somebody else, 'I love you,' I must be able to say, 'I love in you everybody, I love through you the world...'"

I heard an interesting interview this past week with Tony Perkins of the Family Research Council, a group that is strongly in favor of the marriage amendment to the Constitution. He was being asked what he felt about [Vice President Cheney](#) straying from the partly line in expressing his objection to such an amendment, saying "Lynne and I have a gay daughter, so it's an issue our family is very familiar with... With respect to the question of relationships, my general view is freedom means freedom for everyone. ... People ought to be free to enter into any kind of relationship they want to." Mr. Perkins generously allowed that Cheney's love for his daughter had most likely led him to make such a statement, but went on to say that Mr. Cheney should not let his love for his daughter cloud his decisions about public policy. Now think about this...Here is the President of the *Family Research Council* saying that you should certainly not let your love for your family influence important decisions. And the truth is, Mr. Perkins was not only troubled by Vice President Cheney's love for his family; he was concerned because it seemed that, through his love and acceptance of his daughter, it seemed that Mr. Cheney had

also grown in acceptance toward a whole host of people who suffer discrimination because they are gay. This particular love had translated, as Fromm says it will, into a much wider understanding. And isn't that the way it works with all of us? Could this sort of process be the bedrock of a politics of love?

But lest anyone get the idea that this is easy, or that love, as an art, is somehow elegant and clean, removed from the practicalities of day-to-day life...well, ask any artist here. The actual task of *creating* art is a messy business. Whether we are wrestling with paint or with words or with clay...or with love, (and we are all apprentice artists there), we are wrestling nonetheless, and we get dirty, and we get frustrated, and we make mistakes and we start over...and the next day, even when we don't *feel* like it, even when we don't *want* to, we get back to work and we practice and we struggle and we hope to get a little better at it each day. We have to practice, we must approach the art of loving with discipline, we have to work at it...loving our neighbors, loving our families, loving the members of our community, loving our leaders, loving the executives at Wal-Mart or the Enron CEO's or the people at the opposing political convention or the people on the other team or the people in the other country, loving the person who gives us the wrong change and then argues with us about it, loving the person who cuts us off and then gives us a dirty look, loving the person so close to us who has seemed to make a practice of misunderstanding us, loving the loved one who has hurt us, loving the arrogant, the ignorant, the unlovable, is, indeed, not reliant upon emotion, it is a practice. To paraphrase Jack Kerouac, "Loving our neighbor wasn't built in a day." Loving our neighbor *as ourselves*.

When I was growing up, there was a distinct interpretation put on this passage, one that I now can't find much support for, but is still widespread, I think. The translation of this passage into Midwestern Scandinavian Lutheran went something like this: If we loved other people half as much as we love ourselves, the world would be a better place. Or: We all gotta stop loving ourselves so much so we have something left over for other people. But notice that this is not what the verse says. It says: Love your neighbor *as yourself*.

The story of Rabbi Schmelke puts this in another light. Those of you who work with your hands may have found the story that the rabbi told a little unbelievable. The idea of your own hand mistakenly hitting you...Me, I am a bit on the clumsy side. I related to that with no trouble. I can hurt myself hanging a picture. My hand has found countless ways to injure me in the course of even simple tasks. Just as you wouldn't punish your hand for doing you harm, says the rabbi, so should you forgive your neighbors and continue to love them even when you feel they have wronged you, for we are all inescapably connected. If you harm your neighbor, you harm yourself.

What is an even more embarrassing confession for me, in relation to this story, is that sometimes I *am* compelled to punish my hand for hurting me. Really. I don't think I'm alone (although the expression on some of your faces is leading me in that direction). Truly, though, I think that sometimes we treat ourselves with something much less than love. We are so ashamed of our selfishness (which, of course, is not the same as love), that we withhold basic kindness. We make a mistake, then we call ourselves stupid; we take blame for things outside of our control; we pile on regret for choices we made, and we pile on fear for the stupid choices we are sure to make in the future. It goes on and on.

For, you see, there is another truth in the story. If all souls are one, if we are each a spark from the original soul, if what harms you also harms me, then the reverse is true, also. Withholding love from myself is a harm to others. If we are inescapably connected, and I believe that we are, then you will undoubtedly feel the results of my inability to love myself. When we affirm the worth and dignity of every human, when we practice reaching out to them in love, we also need to extend that hand of kindness to ourselves.

Love yourself! Do you realize how hard that is for this Midwestern Lutheran boy of Scandinavian descent to say? I had to practice that line before I came to make sure I could get it out. And since I practiced, I'll say it again: Love yourself. Do not be afraid to do that. It is not selfishness; it is not self-absorption; it is a proud affirmation of our Universalist heritage, of our Christian heritage and Jewish heritage; it is acceptance of yourself as a worthy creature, as a unique and lovable representative of humanity, and it is the best preparation, the best reinforcement, the best practice for extending that love to all of humanity.

Because, let's face it, you will get hurt loving the world. Standing for love, [writes Granny D. Haddock](#), political activist and senatorial candidate, is not gentle work, nor is it painless and bloodless, as so many of the people around the world know.

Loving a person. Loving the world. It is not painless. It is not without risk. It is often paradoxical and frustrating. I never feel so strong as when I am loving, and yet feel myself to be utterly vulnerable also. Love makes me feel that I am swept up in the wisdom of ages, and yet I rarely feel so clueless as when it comes to effectively expressing my love. I believe that love can conquer so much hatred and suffering, yet I also know the truth of Leonard Cohen's words when he says, love is not a victory march, it's a cold and it's a broken hallelujah.

No, it is not painless. It is not without struggle and tears and sweat and disappointments.....but it is better than anything else. Love takes off masks that we fear we cannot live without and know we cannot live within, writes James Baldwin.

Will love influence the executives of Wal-Mart? Will it re-organize the priorities of our government? Will it bring Israelis and Palestinians together in peace? Will it stop the bloodshed and rape and torture in Sudan? Can it change the world? Will it change the world? I don't know. Here's what I do know, a legacy from our Jewish and Christian heritage for which I shall always be grateful: Love is, and always has been, our best hope.

1. Closing Words #705 (Hosea Ballou)

If we agree in love, there is no disagreement that can do us any injury, but if we do not, no other agreement can do us any good.

Let us endeavor to keep the unity of the spirit in the bonds of peace.