

When Our Heart Is in a Holy Place
A sermon by Rev. Roberta Finkelstein©
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Unitarian Universalists of Clearwater, FL

Reading: Our reading this morning is a short excerpt from the Ware Lecture delivered by Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr at the General Assembly of the Unitarian Universalist Association in May 1966. “The Greek language has three words for love – one is the eros, another is the word filio, and another is the word agape. I am thinking not of eros, or of friendship as expressed in filio, but of agape, which is understanding, creative, redemptive good will for all, an overflowing love which seeks nothing in return. I believe that in our best moments in this struggle we have tried to adhere to this.”

Sermon: Those of you who are of a certain age may remember a song popular in the mid-70’s called “Love Hurts.” Remember it? Even if you don’t remember that it was sung by a Scottish group called Nazareth, you may remember the strong tenor of the lead singer as he crooned, “To take a lot of pain, take a lot of pain. Love is like a cloud, holds a lot of rain. Love hurts.” One day while driving home from day care with my 3-year-old son in the car, that song came on the radio. I was not paying much attention to either the music or the child in the back seat; I was probably running my mental to-do list like many harried, working mothers do. So, when Danny asked, “Mom, does it?” I wasn’t sure what he was talking about. Then he said, quite plaintively, “Does love hurt?”

What do you say to a 3-year-old about the complexities of love? I did not want him to think that a painful relationship was the norm for love, nor did I want him to think that love was all ooey-gooey and wonderful all the time. I don’t remember exactly what I said in answer to his question. All I remember is that part of the answer was, “Sometimes.”

Does love hurt? Today is Valentine's Day, a day that celebrates romantic love, which is, as Martin Luther King reminds us, just one of the kinds of love identified by the ancient Greeks. Eros, to be precise, the love of passion and attraction and physical longing, the love of romanticism, the love that inspires song (Love Makes the World Go Round) and poetry. Why is a day of celebration of eros named after a Catholic saint? Who was Saint Valentine and why do we have a holiday named after him that involves red roses and chocolate? While much about the 'real' Valentine is lost to history, it is believed he was a 3rd century priest in Rome, whose enthusiastic proselytizing for the Christian faith led to his arrest and martyrdom. St. Valentine was not in any way associated with romantic love until the 14th century, when that scamp Chaucer wrote a mythic manuscript associating St. Valentine with romantic, courtly love. Speculation also suggests that it was believed that birds began to mate in mid-February to hatch their babies in the spring, thus associating romantic love with February 14th. Then of course Hallmark and Whitman's and FTD got ahold of it and Valentine's Day became the holiday we are familiar with today. Or so the cynic in me says.

Does romantic love hurt? Just think about the image of cupid's arrow piercing the heart. It may be wonderful to fall in love, but when your heart is pierced, there is almost certainly pain involved. To fall in love, to stay in love, is to risk everything. It is to make sacrifices, it is to enlarge your world view, it is to let your heart break over and over, knowing that each time it breaks, you and your beloved can, together repair the broken places, making your relationship and your hearts even stronger. Remember the passage in *The Velveteen Rabbit* when the Skin Horse explains to the rabbit about being real? "When you are real you don't mind being hurt. That's why it doesn't happen to people who break easily, or have sharp edges, or have to be carefully kept. Once you are real, you can't become unreal again."

But I am not here today to talk about romantic love, I am here to talk about agape. About the love that creates and sustains beloved community. The love that King referred to as, “understanding, creative, redemptive good will for all, an overflowing love which seeks nothing in return.” And now I imagine I hear you asking, plaintively, “Does it, Rev. Roberta? Does that kind of love hurt?” And I must be honest and say, “Sometimes.”

The love that creates and sustains beloved community hurts sometimes because we who choose to enter into covenant, the sacred act of community making, well . . . we are imperfect and flawed human beings. We make mistakes, we say things and do things we wish we had not, we fail to say and do things we wish we had. And yet we persist in creating and recreating our community of faith because despite all that imperfectness, we want and need to be part of something larger than ourselves. We want and need companionship, challenges, inspiration. We want it deeply and urgently enough to endure all that the Skin Horse endured and more. “His brown coat was bald in patches and showed the seams underneath, and most of the hairs in his tail had been pulled out to string bead necklaces.”

Here we are, on this Valentine’s Day, all too aware of the bald patches and the fraying seams and the missing tail hairs. We are a congregation that is, in many ways, broken-hearted. The heart of this community breaks a little bit with each conflict, with each loss. The heart of this community breaks with every betrayal of trust, with every disappointment. The heart of this community broke wide open in 2007 over a terrible act of violence that still reverberates after more than a decade. What do we do with all that broken heartedness? How do we repair the frayed relationships? How do we let go of some of the anger that has protected us, and allow ourselves to be vulnerable, to hurt, and then ultimately, to heal? First, we acknowledge the hurt. Yes, love hurts. Sometimes. Yes, anger is a legitimate

response to being hurt. And yes, in the long run, holding on to anger costs too much. It stops being protective and becomes corrosive.

How, then can we forgive ourselves and each other for all that broken heartedness? First, by remembering that we are bound together, not by a creed, but by a covenant, a sacred vow, a promise that we make and remake to each other every time we come together. We are bound by that covenant even when we are not paying attention to it. We are most bound by that covenant when we have broken it. Covenants call us to our better selves, reminding us that though we are imperfect, though we sometimes fail to honor the promises we have made, those promises are worthy of our best effort, and they are worthy of our return when we stray from them. Covenants are most powerful when we have broken them, recognized our brokenness, and reaffirmed them.

Our covenants call us out of ourselves and into relationship. They remind every one of us that it really, really isn't all about me. Or you. I am fond of telling UU's that the practice of democracy in our congregations means that you will not always get your way, but your voice will always be heard. That is the agape form of democracy. That is covenantal democracy. A set of promises made in love – “the understanding, creative, redemptive good will for all, an overflowing love which seeks nothing in return”.

Rebecca Parker, former President of the Starr King School for the Ministry, wrote this about agape. “Even when our hearts are broken by our own failure or the failure of others cutting into our lives, even when we have done all we can and life is still broken, there is a Universal Love that has never broken faith with us and never will.” Can we hold on to that belief about Universalism? Can we remember that love is the compelling core of our free faith; it is what unites us even in the absence of a set of shared beliefs. Both historically and presently, we know

ourselves by our doctrine of radical love. If a covenant is based on love, then the relationships that emerge out of that covenant will reflect that love. The community that is built on that basis will embody that love. I would be so bold as to say that a covenanted community is the very incarnation of love. And that is the only incarnation we need. Happy Valentine's Day, beloveds.