

Universal Love
I Corinthians 13
First Unitarian Church, Ithaca, 26 February 2023
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What makes love universal? What is it about love that is transcendent and traversing, that enables it to span religions and cultures, regions and ethnicities? What is it about love that breaches boundaries and barriers constructed by human beings and human-made institutions? What is it about love that is immanent and irrepressible? What is it that irrespective of hatred and violence, injustice and inhumanity, as it is written in today's scripture reading, "Love never fails"? What makes love universal?

1. Love is universal because love is durable.

Harry Emerson Fosdick, the preeminent Protestant preacher of the first half of the 20th Century, called love the most durable power in the world; he used this phrase at the title of a sermon in his book *Successful Christian Living*. Fosdick's sermon corresponds with verses 4 and 7 of I Corinthians 13 in *The Amplified Bible*: "Love endures with patience and serenity Love bears all things [regardless of what comes], believes all things [looking for the best in each one], hopes all things [remaining steadfast during difficult times], endures all things [without weakening]." Love, writes the apostle Paul, never fails.

Paul speaks of a love greater than the spiritual gifts enumerated in the first 2 verses of this chapter: speaking in tongues, prophecy, special knowledge, faith. Paul understood, as biblical scholar Shively Smith notes, that these gifts and functions, which have their place, are not enough by themselves to sustain this faith community. Paul proclaims love is, as Prof. Smith notes, "the greatest power in a community that seems to be lacking" in love. Love is the ethic that would enable the Corinthians to navigate a community diverse in ethnicity, gender, age, rank, class, marital status, social status, power, skills and gifts.

Paul's letter to this church reveals how its inability to properly engage its diversity had led to discord. Corinth was rife with rivalries and factions. There were disputes related to the feast of Holy Communion. For Paul, diversity itself was not the problem: diversity reflected the God who created a diverse humankind. For Paul, Dr. Smith says,

diversity is non-negotiable. Paul is issuing to the readers of I Corinthians 13 a call to action!

That call to action could be summed up in the word of Benjamin Elijah Mays, the legendary president of Morehouse College in Atlanta, who mentored Martin Luther King, Jr. into the ministry: that women and men must learn to live together as brothers and sisters or perish together as fools. That summons is as relevant for us who live in America in the 21st Century as it was for Mays in the 20th Century and Corinth in the first Century. We live in a society which diversity is being vilified by those who are animated not by love but the corrupt pursuit and use of power: political leaders who traffic in fantasies of American innocence, which the public theologian Reinhold Niebuhr called a delusion; who whitewash the realities of American racism and advance inaccurate histories; who, as *New York Times* columnist Charles Blow wrote, exploit anti-gay, anti-immigrant and anti-Black sentiments among groups in vulnerable populations so they fight one another and don't fight for one another. We live in a nation where a proposal for a national divorce fans the flames of division and further undermines democracy.

On the other hand, when actions are motivated and informed by love, love can do what naked power grabs cannot and will not ever do: build something constructive. It can work toward justice; Cornel West reminds us justice is what love looks like in action. As if speaking to us today Fosdick says, "The present situation does not argue the failure of love It displays on a planetary scale the impotence of force" —oppressive force, unjust force—to be constructive. Love has not failed so much as human capacity to put love in action has failed.

2. Love is Universal Because it is Tethered to Truth.

First Corinthians 13:6 tells us love does not rejoice at injustice but rejoices in the truth. One of the truths about love, says Shively Smith, is that it is not passive and fluffy. It is not weak and sentimental. Love requires a certain kind of tough-mindedness. Love is patient. Love is kind. Love involves truth-telling, not only in interactions with others but in our reflections about ourselves. Love involves fortitude, consistency and respect for others.

Dr. King embodied this toughminded ethic of love when he said (with a gender inclusive edit):

... love is ultimately the only answer to humankind's problems. And I'm going to talk about it everywhere I go. I know it isn't popular to talk about in some circles today. I'm not talking about emotional bosh when I talk about love, I'm talking about a strong, demanding love. And I've seen too much hate. I've seen hate on the faces on the faces of sheriffs in the South. I've seen hate on the faces of too many Klansmen and too many White Citizens Councilors in the South to want to hate myself, because every time I see it, I know it does something to their faces and their personalities and I say to myself that hate is too great a burden to bear. I have decided to stick with love.

And—parenthetically—lest we forget, King also saw a level of hatred *in the North*, in places such as the Chicago suburb of Cicero in 1966, when he began to promote economic justice, a level of hatred he said he had not seen even in the South.

The kind of love Martin King talked about isn't easy to practice. I know that from personal experience. I am a 66-year old Black, Christian minister, scholar and community leader, born and raised in Baltimore, whose earliest memories were shaped by the Civil Rights and Black Power eras. I know what it's like to be stopped by police for no good reason. I know what it's like to look down the barrel of a policeman's gun at 17 years old, while standing at a bus stop, and be frisked to determine whether I and a friend with me had robbed a mom and pop store, then let us go as the bus arrived. I know what it's like to be disrespected and treated differently from White colleagues. I know what it's like to pray daily for the safety of a 32-year-old son who bears my name and lives in Memphis—where Kyrie Nichols was killed by police—and a 38-year old son-in-law in Rochester, where Daniel Prude died in police custody. Both of them are accomplished professionals. I know what it's like to pray for the safety of a beautiful 34-year-old daughter and entrepreneur and our 4-year old granddaughter as they make their way in Rochester. I have been married to a brilliant, spirit-filled Black woman for early 36 years who has endured the slings and arrows of outrageous racism and sexism in the larger society, in higher education and, as a clergywoman, in the church.

For all these reasons and more I know beyond doubt that the kind of love Martin King talked about, that Paul of Tarsus wrote about, that both of these brave men lived out, is not easy. And I imagine this kind of love presents its challenges to you. But you and I cannot stoop to the level of our enemies and become like them and make things worse.

We must take on the challenge of practicing what love demands, whatever our circumstances and challenges may be, to do our part to advance the demands of this text and the goal of love, which is justice: the right ordering of relations. We must remember that universal love does not rejoice in injustice but is tethered to truth. The truth makes us free when we follow the truth.

3. Finally, Love is Universal Because It Emphasizes Interdependence.

Prof. Smith makes this point about love and interdependence:

The love Paul is talking about here ... is an up at dawn, feet on the ground, tools in hand, working kind of love. It builds communities. It nurtures positive social interactions, and not just social networks (which many of us have come to prefer). Paul's declaration of love unifies. Love is the way by which we talk to each other (1 Corinthians 1:5; 16:20), eat with one another (1 Corinthians 8:13; 10:27; 11:33-34), fellowship together (1 Corinthians 11:20), and affirm all (1 Corinthians 16:15-16, 18). Love transcends our self-imposed caste systems and personal biases. It forms whole and holistic people, who are anchored in the well-being of others. Love will not let us down if we *genuinely live in it together* (1 Corinthians 16:14).

Dr. King reminds us that all of life is interrelated:

All (of us) are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be, and you can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be. This is the inter-related structure of reality.

Universal Love

First Unitarian, Ithaca, 26 Feb. 2023

Page 5

We must ask ourselves how we can, as individuals and as members of this worshipping community and the Ithaca community, continue to create and perpetuate the interrelated, interconnected, interdependent world to which this text points. What have we done? What have we already done here at First Unitarian? What more needs to be done? Where do the gifts and graces I have been given fit in this mix? Everyone has a role to play.

My personal conviction is that love is universal because God is the source of love. My conviction is in sync with this morning's reading from the works of Howard Thurman.

The Psalmist says that as long as the love of God shines on us undimmed, not only may no darkness obscure but also we may find our way to a point in other hearts beyond all weakness and all strength, beyond all that is good and beyond all that is evil. There is no such thing outside ourselves, no circumstance, no condition, no vicissitude, that can ultimately separate us from the love of God and from the love of one another. And we pour out our gratitude to God that this is so! Amen.

Universal Love

First Unitarian, Ithaca, 26 Feb. 2023

Page 6

Niebuhr: Man's capacity for justice makes democracy possible; but man's inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary."

War is not the answer, for only love can conquer hate—Marvin Gaye, *What's Going On*
"Love is the greatest force in the universe. It is the heartbeat of the moral cosmos. He who loves is a participant in the being of God." MLK, Jr.

II. Love is self-critical. Love for King was not only the capacity to forgive one's enemies, one's oppressor. Love compelled King to call out his own country for perpetuating racism, militarism and materialism, what he called the three demonic triplets, in his famous speech denouncing the Vietnam War on 4 April 1967, exactly a year before his assassination in Memphis.

"There can be no deep disappointment where there is not deep love"—Letter from a Birmingham Jail, 1963.

III. Love Will Have the Last Word: Love compels us to realize our dependence on each other. Dr. King reminds us, in his Letter from Birmingham City Jail, that "In a real sense all life is inter-related. All (of us) are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be, and you can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be. This is the inter-related structure of reality."

"I believe that unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word in reality. This is why right, temporarily defeated, is stronger than evil triumphant." Nobel Prize acceptance speech, 1964.

King quoting Toynbee in Riverside speech:

Love is the ultimate force that makes for the saving choice of life and good against the damning choice of death and evil. Therefore the first hope in our inventory must be the hope that love is going to have the last word.

Fosdick: Bitterness imprisons life; love releases it. Bitterness paralyzes life; love empowers it. Bitterness sours life; love sweetens it. Bitterness sickens life; love heals it. Bitterness blinds life; love anoints its eyes. Also see his sermon, "The Most Durable Power in the World," in *Successful Christian Living*, which inspired MLKJr's "The Most Durable Power" of 1957.

I have decided to stick to love. Hate is too great a burden to bear.

West: Justice is what love looks like in action (love and justice are intertwined). Love is a motivational force. Justice is a coercive force.