

**Sermon given JANUARY 28TH 2024 by Reverend Peaches Gillette at Unitarian -
Universalist Society of Ithaca , NY**

When I thought about the concept of liberating love, I had to step back and ask, do we liberate love or does love liberate us? Perhaps both must happen in order for what we know of love to be effective, or used to the extent of its potential. Perhaps there is a chicken and egg thing going on here and we will never know which came first.

What I did not have to step too far back to see is that love, whether we liberate it, or it liberates us, is necessary in order for sustainable peace to take hold.

What WE must do for certain, is to liberate ourselves from prisons of hate and conflict in order for us to even begin to think about liberating love. We carry around our constructed walls that block our ability to engage with love to the degree where we feel a freedom had been won. To liberate is to set free.

Listen to this :

According to the dictionary, “to liberate” is:

to release,

to deliver,

to emancipate,

to loosen,

to unleash,

to redeem,

to exonerate,

to allow to leave,

to disentangle,

To give liberty.

Beautiful, perfect words. They feel good, right? We get it. We're feelin' it. Heck. We can relate to the feeling so deeply, we want this liberation right now.

Now that we identified the meaning of liberty and its extension, which is to liberate, let's take a moment to talk about the qualities and characteristics of love itself. Love is not some fuzzy vague notion, a sweet feeling, an uncharacterized emotion. It too has qualities and characteristics. It is a full body of a way of spiritually and emotionally orienting ourselves. I will name a couple of its characteristics and qualities as it is stated in 1st Corinthians.

Love is patient, love is kind...

But we will do it this way. Help me out with your own words: I want you to call out some of the words that define love for you - just call them out:

[pause]

BUT KNOW THIS: there is no reasonable way to speak about liberating love without speaking about the things that keep love (or ourselves) captive or blocked.

WHAT IS IT THAT WE ARE LIBERATING LOVE FROM?

IS LIBERATING SOMETHING TO SET IT FREE?

THEN WHO OR WHAT IS ITS CAPTOR??

Nothing we say here should ever be said because it sounds lovely. It should only be said to stimulate thought, to move us toward self-reflection, to help us grow into, or become the world we hope for, a world in which we are consistently liberating love. We must also understand, and try to see clearly, how within our everyday behavior and interactions toward one another, we find it so easy to hold back love, to make others negotiate its ransom, to bind it so it has no freedom, to create mini wars.

We do this consciously and subconsciously. We do this because we absolutely forget that liberating love, or ourselves, often requires a certain degree of tireless focus, which keeps us aware of the walls we build, which keeps us at work tearing down all the things that prevent its release. We are surrounded by a climate of intolerance and an unwillingness to forgive. We are harsh on one another, almost

expecting a certain kind of perfection from one another that meets our personal expectations. Look at our political realities that do not allow us to have different standpoints without gross contention. Everything we do or say is policed in a way that justifies a sort of social bullying that is confused with social justice.

A mistake we might make in our interpersonal relationships can turn into hating someone, into months of not speaking or even the loss of a relationship or friendship, into the loss of a job, into the loss of community. And ultimately into a loss of hope, faith or our sense of self. It is painful.

Some of you may remember the experience I told you about the horrible note someone left on my car because I had parked too close to his car - vile, aggressive, so angry. My more recent experience was with a friend who often jokes about the fact that she has no idea how to handle conflicts except to cry. She joked about it and I laughed. And somehow my laughing made her feel bad. She never told me. I am friends with her family, and her adult son invited me to a small holiday gathering, neither he or I knowing about her bad feelings. When I arrived, with bread to share and after helping prepare the salad, I was told by her that she really did not have anything for me to eat because everything had meat or cheese in it, neither of which I eat.

Now we are getting into uncomfortable matters because we must all ask ourselves, how conditional is our love? How easily do we become, well, mean? How liberated are we when it comes to love, and how liberated is our love when things don't go our way - when we feel slighted, when someone "works on our nerves," as my mother would say, even when someone makes a mistake.

EVEN if someone does something deliberately harmful, do we shackle and imprison our love more tightly? We can choose love in how we respond. We can choose to liberate ourselves from holding grudges, from festering in resentment or from contentious other responses, reactions, or behaviors that divide us further. WE CAN CHOOSE TO LIBERATE LOVE. We may not realize it, but the peace we ask for, that we pray for is a by-product of love. It is actually motivated by love, even if it as simple as our love of our own lives or the lives of those we care for, the love of the world that houses all of us.

HERE ARE A FEW MORE QUOTES ABOUT LOVE:

“Hatred paralyzes life; love releases it. Hatred confuses life; love harmonizes it. Hatred darkens life; love illuminates it.”

-Martin Luther King Jr.

“I feel our nation’s turning away from love...moving into a wilderness of spirit so intense we may never find our way home again. I write of love to bear witness both to the danger in this movement, and to call for a return to love.”

-Bell Hooks (2000)

(Look, none of us deny that people have very different social emotional skills, but what we all have is the capacity for great love. The question is what will we do with that capacity? What will we do with love? This question should be the topic of one of the most important conversations we must have in groups, with individuals, and within our own hearts - - - HOW CAN WE FULLY LIBERATE LOVE AND HOW WILL WE CELEBRATE ITS FREEDOM?)

“The choice that frees or imprisons us is the choice of love or fear. Love liberates, fear imprisons.”

-Gary Zukav

“Love is so unconditional, love liberates.”

-BeBe Winans

I will end by reading 1st Corinthians

O Love is patient; love is kind. It does not envy; it does not boast; it is not inflated. It is not rude; but even-tempered; it does not brood over injury. Love does not delight over wrongdoing but rejoices with the truth.