

## Called by Love: The Heart of the Matter

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First Parish in Brookline

“Called by Love: At the Heart of the Matter”

“Whatever you do, just don’t talk about love. It’s too cliché, and I think it’s really just a placeholder.”

Words of advice from a close friend of mine with regard to this morning’s sermon. Her words were not exactly what I wanted to hear.

“Well, here’s the deal,” I said to her. “I am talking about love. The newsletter has been released and the sermon description is in it.”

“It’s also the first sentence to their mission statement.” I explained further. “‘Called by Love. Sustained by Community. Committed to Justice.’ That’s the congregation’s mission statement.

I’m going to preach my first three sermons on each of the sentences.”

As challenging as my friend’s warnings were and as tempting as it is to avoid hard topics, like love, I believe that we are called to actually lean into these issues rather than avoid them. As we heard in the reading this morning, the question of love is not one that can be evaded.

It has become clear to me in the first few days of my being here as your Interim Senior Minister that you have made remarkable strides toward creating this vision of beloved community.

The manner in which the interim search committee conducted their work. The warmth with which the Parish Committee, staff, and all of you, have welcomed me.

Reading the article in Friday’s *Boston Globe* about the Brookline town meeting and how some twenty of you showed up and testified in support for officers of color who have reported harassment within the Police Department. I see it. The relationships that you are creating with your community partners, Centro Presente and the Chelsea Collaborative. Your affiliate ministers and their ministries in the community including on college campuses. It is indeed a powerful mission and vision and you are living it.

But let me come back to the concept of love. Just what do we mean when we talk about love? Most of us get that love as we use it in religious community is not limited by any means to romantic love. Thomas Merton calls love “A certain special way of being alive...an attitude toward life. A conception and an expression of ourselves...” And he says, love is “ultimately what we think we are here for”.

Love as we use it in Unitarian Universalism is multifaceted. It is a feeling, a way of being or a value to which we aspire. We could stop there but it still seems a little too esoteric.

I think we need another, or additional, understanding of love. One that can be applied to our daily living. That can guide our feet, the way in which we live our days on this Earth. When we

keep love in the symbolic, or "too hard to define" category, we also keep it at arm's length. We make it about a perfection that is humanly impossible and therefore we can feel like a failure, or like somehow we aren't living up to the expectations of what it means to be a loving person.

Love is a verb. Love made visible is how we behave in this world. In our day-to-day living. Small actions, and big decisions. It is how we treat ourselves, and others. Those to whom are related, with whom we are intimate; and those we barely know, and cross paths with walking along a sidewalk or a hiking path, or a town meeting.

Though I believe that we are all born with an innate desire to love, I also believe that we have to learn how to do that. Thus we need to have an understanding of love that we can cultivate and practice and that we can use in our relationships, in our communities, and our families.

With this in mind, I've landed on a definition of love that for now I am calling accountable kindness. Accountable kindness. And yes, when perfected, it is indeed unconditional love. However as with any virtue, that perfection, if achievable at all is only achieved by cultivating it, practicing it—ultimately mastering it. And mastery only comes with repeated effort and many mistakes.

So what do I mean by kindness? The world language process; a nonprofit whose mission is to further world peace by developing a Universal language or International Auxiliary Language defines kindness as: "Showing compassion. Giving tender attention in ways that brings others happiness. Friendly, helpful, well meaning".

Naomi Shihab Nye in our poem this morning describes kindness "as the deepest thing inside", and "the only thing that makes sense anymore." She also makes the case that genuine kindness requires a level of compassion that comes only when we know sorrow, when we know the human frailty and how it could be any of us who is the suffering one.

By accountable I mean that we are not in this alone. That we are in relationships with others who also hold love as a value to guide their lives. People who will give us honest feedback, who will sit with us during times of discernment and who will forgive us when we err.

To live with accountable kindness means that we use kindness or compassion as our default. It means that we assume that everyone is doing their best. That we ask questions if we don't understand rather than being hurt or offended. Kindness looks like forgiveness, going the extra mile, doing something because we know it is right. Not because it is easy.

How do we cultivate and practice this kind of living? As Unitarian Universalists we don't have a rule book, or religious doctrine that tells us exactly how to act. How to be kind. We have our seven principles of course but they are not dictates.

Living as a kind person isn't always easy and it isn't always clear. We learn how to live in accountable kindness in community. This is relational work. It is from the connections - authentic, vulnerable connections - where we can be real, honest, and where we can make mistakes.

I used to think that kindness meant always being nice. I had it inappropriately intertwined with people pleasing. I thought that the more people approved of me, the kinder I was being. I now understand differently. I was a miserable people pleaser. I failed horribly at pleasing everyone, and I was miserable while trying to do it. I've learned that some of the kindest things that we are called to do are also the hardest.

For example, my going to divinity school, a calling that first came more than twenty years ago. When does one do something like that? Something that would have a huge impact on my family, my kids. These were not things that I could figure out on my own. I needed the people in my life to whom I am be accountable who can help me make those decisions. So at times over the years, I said no to myself...it is time to wait. Other times, like now, I said yes.

Daily, we are faced with deciding how to live with compassion and accountable kindness. We have to balance our personal needs with the needs of those we love. We have to discern when it is okay to say no, and when we must push ourselves a little harder and say yes.

This is where community is essential. We need people who we know and trust and who and trust us in return to help us in those decisions. We need people who love us just the way we are and at the same time push us to become even better versions of our true selves. We need people to help guide our feet, and people for whom we can be guide. We need to be in this human condition together.

Here, at First Parish in Brookline, this is what I see. This kind of accountable kindness.

The work of interim ministry that we will do together requires this kind of love and accountable kindness. The primary goal of interim ministry is for a congregation, with the support of an interim minister, to understand who you have been and who you want to be, and what kind of minister you need to achieve that vision.

Getting to that place of clarity is not easy. When done well, it is in fact, hard work. It is grief work, discernment, shaping of trust, community building. It is love in action. It requires honesty, authenticity, accountable kindness that is not always easy, but in the end will lead to a transformed life for each of you and for this congregation.

In talking with one of my colleagues, and mentors before coming here, I shared a concern that I had. What if I fall in love with them? What if we fall in love with each other? I asked her.

"Yeah." She answered. "That would be great! What are going to do? Not love them so as to avoid the possibility of grieving when it's over!? That's crazy!" "She said to me. "Go. Love them. Love with all that you've got. Do good work together. When it is over, you will all be the better because of it."

There are those who might say that the safest thing to do during an interim ministry is not to love. But if we use the concept of love as accountable kindness, how can we do otherwise and be faithful to the interim work? And to my mentor's point, to what end. What do we lose in order to protect ourselves from some future grief? We lose a lot.

On the other hand, what do we gain from connecting and being vulnerable? From loving? We open ourselves to personal and congregational growth, to joy, to deepening relationships with individuals, with this congregation and with our larger Unitarian Universalist faith. By loving we bring our whole selves into this work, and this shared life. We engage, and we commit. From this place, we stand open to possibility, to transformation. This work, all of it, will call forth creative energies, and teach life and relational skills that will benefit every one of us.

What do we gain by loving? We stand to gain everything.

And we will not have run this race in vain.

Amen and Blessed Be.