

THE VIRTUE AND WISDOM OF LOVE

VII: The Classical Virtues Today

A Sermon Delivered at
First Parish in Needham, Unitarian Universalist
Sunday, April 29, 2007
The Rev. John A. Buehrens, Minister

Resp. Reading 638

Love

I Corinthians 13

Modern Reading

from *The Wisdom of Love*

Jacob Needleman

We cannot love as God loves or as a saint loves. Nor, if we read the sacred texts right, does wisdom demand that of us. The love that St. Paul speaks of, the love that “builds up,” that is long-suffering, free of envy and egoism, that does not seek personal gain and is not easily provoked and thinks no evil thoughts of the other – that love exists in us at the moment and for as long as an individual regards the other as seeking the truth, as harboring within him- or herself what the Buddhists call ‘the holy wish.’

The work of love is the work of presupposing the wish for awakening in the other. In the midst of all that two people must face and live through together, the work of love silently acknowledges in the other the wish to become free from illusion, fear, egoism, false imagination, self-deception, tension, and violence; free from the power of life itself to devour our inner possibilities. The work of love . . . presupposes not only the wish to be free from these perennial weaknesses of the human condition – but to be free for contact with another quality of being in oneself, a conscious energy that is meant to penetrate the mind, heart, and body of every human being.

No human being can put this wish or this search in another. But the beginning of intentional love is to assume its presence in the other and to return again and again to this unspoken assumption in the give and take of shared life.

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“and the greatest of these is love.” – I Cor. 13:13

English is a mushy language. By which I mean that it tries often to convey too many meanings with one word only. And no word in English is more overburdened than *love*. A truth I first learned at the age of 16. Not from a girlfriend, though that soon followed; but rather simply from learning to express myself in another idiom.

I was an exchange student that year, living in Milan, attending a Jesuit high school and living with a classmate’s family. I’d had one month of warning about where I was going.

Maria, the Italian war-bride who had married Leo, the police chief and supermarket butcher in our small town in Michigan, had led my first lessons in her native language. “*Non si dice* -- one doesn’t say,” said Maria, “*ti amo* – I love you, unless you mean-a to *fare amore*, to make love. *Invece*, instead, *si dice, meglio*, better: *ti voglio bene*.”

“But doesn’t that just mean, “I wish you well”? I asked. “*Ma certo*,” she replied, “Of course. *Ma e` piu` importante*. It means more.” I sensed her speaking from sad experience.

Two years later, while I was a freshman in college, my high school sweetheart’s father, first mate on a Great Lakes ship of US Steel, drowned in a shipwreck. I know why now, but didn’t then – why I couldn’t even attempt to console her. I just pulled away – badly. Leaving her, I still know, both hurt and puzzled. I still feel guilty, thinking about it.

Our relationships are like this. We don’t always know ourselves. And yet we are called, by Life, into relationship with one another. We are, at a human minimum, social animals. If not spiritual beings – challenged to unite our finite physical selves to enduring meanings and purposes we only slowly begin to discern. It is, however, a virtue, simply to try.

I began this series of sermons, seven months ago, talking about how the secular virtues – prudence, temperance, courage and justice – are all misconstrued today, to our detriment; though all remain, when rightly understood, important. Then, earlier this year, about how the subordinate spiritual virtues – faith, and hope – need forms that transcend tribalism and particular aspiration, to be truly spiritual. But the greatest of all the spiritual virtues – *vi voglio bene, io* – is still best called, in English, simply “love.”

But just as the Inuit are said to have 19 words for “snow,” Greeks distinguished between *philia*, friendship; *eros*, passionate love; and *agape*, self-giving love. But the last itself is often misconstrued. It doesn’t mean self-destructive self-sacrifice for the sake of another. Rather it has two motions: one inward, one outward. Who am I? And what am I called to do for the sake of the world of persons I live in and among? Without self-knowledge and awareness, plus love for one’s own being, there’s no good answer to the latter question. And these are ongoing issues, never finally settled, all through life, even among the wise.

“Know thyself.” *Gnothi se auton*, said Socrates. Yet if philosophy is the love of wisdom, then surely the deepest source of wisdom is in love for others. And in every culture and tradition, stories & examples abound, reminding and guiding us to both virtue & wisdom. As is so often the case, behind today’s sermon there is a human encounter that showed me something about the human condition, including my own. Let me tell you about it:

Six weeks ago Gwen and I went to San Francisco to visit our daughter Erica and her husband Andy, who have now bought their first small house together in that pricey city. Rather than stay with them the first night in their tiny apartment on top of Russian Hill, we asked our friends Margot and Peter if they had room for us. “Of course,” they said.

When we first knew them, thirty years ago, in Knoxville, TN, they had two birth children, plus two mixed-race adopted children, plus occasional foster children. Gwen was their case worker. “We’re looking for a community to welcome all our children,” one said. So Gwen, my Episcopalian wife, sent this British-born woman and her Jewish American husband, and their children to the Unitarian church, and to me.

While I was their pastor, they adopted two more children, an African American sibling pair, who had been in foster care in New York City for too long. Later, when I ministered in that city, and Margot had been in a So. California UU church and then in our seminary, I supervised her internship. She has now retired as minister of our San Francisco church. (It's hard when your students start retiring; but then, she always was 10 years my senior!) Peter had retired even earlier from teaching law to help tend their many grandchildren. Four of their six children now have them, and five of six kids live on the West Coast.

When we arrived, Margot was on the beach, three blocks away, thru Golden Gate Park, with a grandchild – the smitten image of his father at age, 10, when I first knew him, and now a tenured professor of psychology at Stanford. Over dinner, we reminisced together. In the morning, as warned, we awoke to Peter practicing his Zen flute after meditation. Margot had already been praying and painting in her study. Her husband may be Jewish, but her spirituality, while not quite orthodox, might be called “Christian-ish,” as Annie Lamotte might put it.

“No one has seen God at any time,” said an early Christian writer. “But if we love one another, God dwells in us, and we in God. For God is love. And those who abide in love, abide in God, God in them. And there is no fear in love, for perfect love casts out fear.”

Then over breakfast we talked about our lives, and our efforts to deal with our anxieties about our children, our own aging, even for one another. On the plane, flying out, I'd been reading a slim book by University of San Francisco philosopher Jacob Needleman. If philosophy is literally the love of wisdom, his book, dedicated to his spouse of many years, is called *The Wisdom of Love: Toward a Shared Inner Life*.

This insight about relationships need not be gendered, but poet Robert Bly once wrote,

A man and a woman sit near each other, and they do not long at this moment
to be older, or younger, nor born in any other nation, or time, or place.

They are content to be where they are, talking or not talking.

Their breaths together feed someone we do not know.

The man sees the way his fingers move;
 he sees her hands close around a book she hands to him.
They obey a third body that they share in common.
They have made a promise to love that body.
Age may come, parting may come, death will come.
A man and a woman sit near each other; as they breathe they feed someone
We do not know, someone we know of, whom we have never seen.

Often we hear of love as either animal love or wholly divine, spiritual love. But there's a third form, says Needleman. Call it intermediate love. Don't strive to go past that level. Just practice it, as the love that attempts to see and to protect the aspiration for spiritual growth, and for love, in others, especially in those who are nearest to you in relationship.

Needleman begins his book where I want to end. With a myth, a wisdom story, from the ancients, the Greeks and Romans. According to Ovid, the gods Zeus and Hermes, took on mortal form, and wandered from house to house to see who would be willing to give them rest and nourishment. But it was a fearful time. No one would receive them. And the gods do not force themselves upon us; they enter only where doors are open to them. Only at the edge of the sea, in a humble dwelling thatched with reeds from the marsh, are they welcomed by a couple who have grown old there together, a great-hearted woman named Baucis and her husband, Philemon. "They confessed their poverty," says Ovid. That is, "it made no difference whether you asked there for master, mistress or servant." They were servants one of another, and of their guests. The 'heaven dwellers' must stoop to pass under their low doorway. They are offered simple chairs and simple fare and warmed by a fire made from bark & leaves, and given wine of "no great age," says Ovid.

But as the dinner goes on, the hosts notice that the flagon, while being passed around, refills itself of its own accord. They recognize that their guests are not mere mortals. Ashamed of the simple meal they have presented, they try to capture and then cook the one goose they have on their little plot. But the bird takes refuge with the gods, who tell

Philemon and Baucis that it is no innocent bird who deserves death, but rather all the self-indulgent, self-absorbed people in the region, who refused to receive them.

The couple are told to climb to a place that sounds like Twin Peaks, overlooking the area, while an earth-quake strikes. (Imagine: I'm in San Francisco, reading all of this!) There, from a higher level, they see nothing but destruction and desolation. What kind of gods are these? Vindictive? Mean? And then they see their humble home, where they spent their lives serving each other, and learning to make room in their hearts and at their hearth for others. As they weep for others, it is changed into a marble temple for the gods. Then Zeus himself sends Hermes to ask them what they wish for. They whisper to one another, then respond. "We wish to be your priests," they say. "to offer hospitality at your shrine to all who would come to seek the Highest. And when our lives are over, we wish to be carried away together."

Outside the shrine, it is said, an oak tree and a linden grew intertwined. And provided an enduring symbol of love as unity in diversity, as the willingness to protect one another's inner life, as virtue, as wisdom. First in the heart, then in the home, then in communities of the spirit like this, then in the world as a whole, this form of love is no mere feeling. Won slowly as wisdom, and anew in every generation, it is this form of love that has the power to become justice – and to transform the world we live in -- into a fit home for our children and our children's children. So may it be. *Vi voglio bene, io.* Amen, and amen.

*Hymn 124

Be that guide whom love sustains. Rise above the daily strife:
Lift on high the good you find. Help to heal the hurts of life.

Be that helper nothing daunts – doubt of friend or taunt of foe.
Ever strive for liberty. Show the path that life should go.

Be that builder trusting good, bitter though the test may be:
Through all ages they are right, though they build in agony.

Be that teacher faith directs. Move beyond the old frontier:
Though the frightened fear that faith, be tomorrow's pioneer.