

THIRST:
Reflections on the Need for Love

A Sermon Delivered for
First Parish in Needham, Unitarian Universalist
Sunday, February 10, 2008
The Rev. John A. Buehrens, Minister

Modern reading

Thirst

Mary Oliver

Another morning and I wake with thirst
for the goodness I do not have. I walk
out to the pond and all the way God has
given us such beautiful lessons. Oh Lord,
I was never a quick scholar but sulked
and hunched over my books past the
hour and the bell; grant me, in your
mercy a little more time. Love for the
earth and love for you are having such a
long conversation in my heart. Who
knows what will finally happen or
where I will be sent, yet already I have
given a great many things away, expect-
ing to be told to pack nothing, except the
prayers which, with this thirst, I am
slowly learning.

Ancient reading

O Beauty

St. Augustine of Hippo,
Confessions, 10.27

How late I came to love you, O Beauty so ancient and so fresh,
how late I came to love you! You were within me, yet I had not
gone outside to seek you. Unlovely myself, I rushed toward all
those lovely things you had made. And always you were with me;
I was not with you. All those beauties kept me far from you—
although they would not have existed at all unless they had their
being in you. You called, you cried, you shattered my deafness.
You sparkled, you blazed, you drove away my blindness. You shed
your fragrance, and I drew in my breath and I pant for you. I tasted
and now I hunger and thirst. You touched me, and now I burn with
longing for your peace.

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All of us thirst for love. Those of us who go into a profession like parish ministry either know or learn this—and, if we are at all self-aware—not only about the people we serve, but also about ourselves. So here is a story on this theme derived from the Sufi tradition:

One night a fish went to sleep under some coral when God Herself appeared in a dream: “I want you to go forth with a message to all the fish in the sea,” God said.

“What should I tell them?” the small fish asked. “Tell them you are thirsty,” God replied. “See what they do.” Then, without another word, God disappeared.

The next morning the fish woke up and remembered his dream. “What a strange thing God wants me to do,” he thought to himself. But soon he saw a tuna swim by, and said, “Excuse me! But I’m thirsty!”

“Then you must be a fool,” the tuna said, flicking his tail disdainfully, swimming away.

The fish did feel a little foolish, but he had a message to share. He caught sight of a shark. Keeping a safe distance, he burred, “Excuse me, sir, but I’m quite thirsty!”

“Then you’re crazy!” the shark replied, a hungry look in his eye. The fish swam away.

All day long he met cod and mackerels and swordfish and groupers, but every time he made his little speech, they turned their backs, and would have nothing to do with him. Feeling confused, the fish sought out the oldest and wisest creature in the sea, who was an old blue whale with three harpoon scars along his side.

“Excuse me! I’m thirsty!” the fish shouted, wondering if the whale could even see him. But the old one stopped suddenly and replied, “You have seen God haven’t you?”

“How did you know?”

“Because I was thirsty once, too.” The old whale laughed. The fish looked very surprised.

“Tell me what this message from God means!” he begged.

“It means that we are looking for Love in all the wrong places,” the old whale explained.

“And for meaning. We look high and low for what is all around us and even within us.

Then we blame God for being absent, or hidden, or too indifferent really to care about us.

Or we decide that God dried up and blew away long ago, if God ever existed.”

“How strange,” the little fish said, “to miss what is all around us and even within us.”

“Very strange,” the whale agreed. “Doesn’t it remind you of fish who say they’re thirsty?”

Now a story like this does not mean in any way to deny or diminish the thirst we all feel.

The human yearning for love is too strong and necessary and natural for that. Remember:

I’m a new grandfather! So I have recently seen just how strong that thirst can be, rising in the night to give my darling granddaughter another bottle, meeting her desperate thirst for food and comfort, and a calm, caring, rocking presence.

And yet I think perhaps the ancient Greeks were right when they said that the ocean of love we need is a mixture of different times of love. There is the part they called *eros*—the salty part, the close, close bonding, often of opposites, lover/beloved, child/parent.

Then there are all the other compounds called *philia*, friendship, mixed in with the whole.

All suspended in good old H₂O, the life giving and life sustaining form of love that the old Greeks called *agape*—which, when we allow it to flow through us, fills us with compassion, kindness, patience, forgiveness, generosity—with all the necessities of life.

Our evolutionary forebears, who stepped out of the ocean onto land, brought within them both a reminder, in the very composition of our blood and our bodies, of the salty sea.

And a continuing thirst for the whole mix we call love. So in each of us, ontogeny repeats

phylogeny, as we proceed from infancy to childhood and adolescence, through *philia* and *eros* toward a more encompassing and mature spirituality of *agape*, embracing both.

So at least I would remind us today. Valentine's Day falls in February, I'm told, because it coincided with an old festival marking the beginning of the mating season of the birds. But let's face it: although *eros* is the salt, the seed, the spice, of life, identifying all of love with romance or *eros* is a chief way to go looking for love in all the wrong places. Too often neglecting the friendship and caring that we also need and thirst for.

"How late I came to love you, O Beauty so ancient and so fresh," wrote Augustine. "Unlovely myself, I rushed toward all those lovely things you had made ... I tasted, and now I hunger and thirst."

For seven years, from 1986 to 1993, I labored in the vineyard called New York City alongside a partner in ministry, Forrest Church, whose father was Senator Frank Church of Idaho. We wrote a book together called *A Chosen Faith*, which all our newcomers get. Last year Forrest was operated on for the same form of cancer that ended my father's life. And last week he told his congregation and friends that his cancer has returned. His hope now is to live long enough for his daughter's wedding in August, or perhaps to reach his 60th birthday in September, and mark 30 years of ministry at All Souls.

He announced this in a sermon he preached last week called "Love and Death." If every minister has but a single sermon theme, under various titles, that has been Forrest's, and he intends to make it the theme of one last book, to add to the 20 he has already written. He framed his message by talking about a friend who compiled a stunning book of photos taken in love around his father's deathbed. Forrest told him, "The act of releasing a loved one from all further obligations as he lies dying—to tell him that it's all right, that he is safe, that we love him and he can go now—is the final expression of unconditional love."

He found that was true when his own father died, also at far too young an age. And I found it true when my father died. But letting go is not easy, either for those who love life or for those who love others.

This week I spent an hour with a couple who met in a hospital nearly twenty years ago. They have both faced great challenges, yet their marriage to one another has been a source of blessing to them both. And now the husband has been diagnosed with a brain tumor. I spent another hour with a beloved woman who knows that she too is facing what I called “the last chapter,” and is too depressed by it to let those who love her come near. And I told them both roughly the same thing. None of us knows what comes after death. But if we allow ourselves to be surrounded by love while we are alive, then surely there is nothing to fear even in dying. From love we come, through love we move, and to love we then return.

In the most recent encyclical released by Pope Benedict XVI—not a person I often expect to agree with—he declines to describe what follows death with any of our human, cheesy attempts to imagine what heaven is like, or communion with God. Instead, he says that what we can hope is that it is, “something more like the supreme moment of satisfaction, in which totality embraces us and we embrace totality ... It would be like plunging into the ocean of infinite love, a moment in which time—the before and after—no longer exists. We can only attempt to grasp the idea that such a moment is life in the full sense, a plunging ever anew into the vastness of being, in which we are simply overwhelmed with joy.”

Mary Oliver wrote the poems in *Thirst* following the death of her long-time partner, Molly Malone Cook, to whom the volume is dedicated. The shortest poem in the book, called “What I Said at Her Service,” reads,

When we pray to love God *perfectly*,
surely we do not mean *only*.
(Lord, see how well I have done.)

No, we are meant not only to love the very ground of our being with all of our heart and mind and strength—we are also meant to love one another, some closely, passionately; some in friendship; but to love even our enemies, because we are all sisters and brothers, children of one great evolutionary mystery that brought us forth and is not yet finished with us, perhaps not even when we die.

We are now in Lent, when millions recall the life of a rabbi who taught that long ago, who lived only to age 33. Who began his ministry by going out into the dry wilderness, there to experience for forty long days and nights both thirst and hunger, and to realize that what tempted him was not what we most need; that he had a message to share from God, like the fish. “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,” he taught, “for they shall be filled.” A message he carried to his life’s end, whispering while dying, “I thirst.”

And now what I remember is giving my father ice chips. Giving them with enduring love. No, it isn’t easy, this plunging into love, deeply, all through life, knowing that everyone and everything that we love, we will at some point lose. Being ever grateful for the gift of life, finite though it is; even though gratitude is the very secret to being ever more loving.

We are surrounded by love. We are children of God. Our fault lies in denying that fact. So if you want to know how to deal with the inevitability of loss, or how to plunge now into a deeper way of loving, hear these words from an earlier poem by Mary Oliver:

You are young. So you know everything. You leap
into the boat and begin rowing. But, listen to me.
Without fanfare, without embarrassment, without
any doubt, I talk directly to your soul. Listen to me.
Lift the oars from the water, let your arms rest, and
your heart, and your heart’s little intelligence, and listen to
me. There is life without love. It is not worth a bent
penny, or a scuffed shoe. It is not worth the body of a
dead dog nine days unburied. When you hear, a mile
away and still out of sight, the churn of the water
as it begins to swirl and roil, fretting around the

sharp rocks—when you hear that unmistakable
pounding—when you feel the mist on your mouth
and sense ahead the embattlement, the long falls
plunging and steaming—then row, row for your life
toward it.

Unison Reading 562

A Lifelong Sharing

Amen

Mother Teresa

Love cannot remain by itself—it has no meaning.
Love has to be put into action and that action is service.
Whatever form we are, able or disabled, rich or poor,
it is not how much we do,
but how much love with put in the doing;
a lifelong sharing of love with others.

Closing Song

Waterfall

Chris Williamson