

WHAT WOULD IT TAKE FOR YOU TO BELIEVE THAT YOU ARE LOVED?

A Sermon Delivered at
First Parish in Needham
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“So . . . what would it take . . . for you to believe . . . that you are loved?”

It’s a good question. I can remember when it was first posed to me. Not by my wife – though God knows Gwen would have had reason to ask it, but rather by my spiritual director. I’d sought out spiritual direction when it became clear, even to me, that the stress and depression I was feeling were not only physical, and emotional, and situational in character, but also had a spiritual dimension.

This was about seven years ago. Ironically, not long after I had been re-elected to a second term as President of the UUA. When no one bothered to run against me, Gwen had given me a coffee mug inscribed, “My job is safe: Nobody wants it.” Outwardly, everything was going well in my life and work. On the very day I was re-elected, I’d announced that the UUA had successfully completed a major capital campaign, going 30% over goal. To achieve that goal, I’d been traveling constantly, however. And that day was also my 50th birthday, and our 25th wedding anniversary. Watershed time.

In the months that followed, I began to feel just how hard it was going to be, during my final four years in office, to carry off the lasting and strategic changes I hoped for – in a religious movement made up of a thousand local and very independent congregations. Predictably, I began working harder than ever, and traveling more, as stress and tension snuck up on me, until Gwen could easily have put back up in our kitchen a sign that she once hung there early in our marriage: “If you are going to be grouchy, unpleasant, and difficult to deal with, there will be a \$50 surcharge simply for putting up with you.”

But she didn't. Instead, she simply and lovingly insisted that we talk with someone together about our relationship. And she was equally insistent that I find a spiritual director – so that I could work at being a more effective religious leader, not just outwardly, but from inside, where it counts.

“Before people can change,” she told me quite wisely, “they have to feel safe, and loved. And before *you* can love others, you have to know, deep down, that you *are* loved.”

“So, just what would it take?” my spiritual director asked. When I laid out all the manifold ways in which I wished that Gwen, and every one else I dealt with, would change their behavior if they really loved me, he just brought it back to the spiritual issue: “So, do you ever notice the ways in which you are loved? Even when you behave badly?”

He tried to get me to meditate on this point using some classic passages from the biblical tradition. But I wasn't buying it. Then a friend reminded me that sometimes we have to go to the stranger in order to rediscover wisdom hidden under our own hearthstones. Under her urging I began to read some of the non-Western spiritual teachers represented in *Love Poems from God*. Slowly, something began to break through. These were people whose lives were opened toward greater love and joy after they began to realize, in circumstances far harder than mine, that there was a love all around them that they had only to turn toward to feel inside.

Take a remarkable woman named Rabia. Born in Basra, in present day Iraq, over a thousand years ago, she had been stolen from her poor family and sold into a brothel, yet she prayed, “O Divine Love, who touches my soul, as no man can! If I love you for fear of Hell, then burn me there, and if I love you for the hope of heaven, exclude me from it. But if I love you for your own sake, grudge me not your everlasting beauty.”

Or her follower, five hundred years later, the great poet, Jaluddin Rumi, who was born in Afghanistan and who founded a school of Sufi mystics at Konya in present day Turkey.

His own family was so jealous of his great spiritual friend and teacher, Shams of Tabriz, that they had the friend killed. Yet Rumi simply redoubled his ecstatic conviction, modeled by Shams, that God is no cosmic moralist, but a passionate friend, who wants us to “with passion pray, with passion work, with passion make love, with passion eat, drink, dance, play! Why look like a dead fish in this ocean of Divine Love?” Rumi asked.

Or his follower, Hafiz, who asked: “How did the rose ever open its heart and give to the world all of its beauty? It felt the encouragement of light against its being, otherwise we all remain too closed.” One morning as I did my morning meditations I opened my eyes to winter light streaming in over the hardwood floors. And I felt it. The next day, I rose even earlier, and I heard the birds in the trees forming a dawn chorus of praise, just to be alive – in love with life. At meals, I really tasted my food. At night, really felt the comfort and warmth of my bed – even when I was away from home; even more when I was there.

I can’t say that’s all it took. There are layers of love, you know. Where we have only one word in English, the ancient Greeks, among others, had several. *Eros*. Which is not only about sexual love. It is also about the capacity we have to love beauty in all its forms. *Philia* – often translated as simply ‘friendship,’ but which also refers to every experience of knowing that we are not alone, that we *do* have companions in life, that we have in one another sources for more meaningful, purposeful, passionate living. And *agape* – the kind of self-giving love of which Paul wrote so eloquently, saying:

“Love is patient; love is kind. Love is not envious or boastful. It is not arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends.” [I Corinthians 13: 4-8a]

So why is it so hard for us to embody such a love? Or to feel, at times, that we are receiving its outpouring, simply in the chance to wake up and live and love another day? The Sufis, I learned, had a simple explanation: We want more, they said. No matter what we have, we want more.

The technical term for this in Sufism is *nafs* – N A F S, which means the greedy soul, the hungry mind, the appetite for more. In that sense it is rather like what Buddhists call the second Noble Truth: that the origin of suffering is the endless craving and clinging that comes from the possessive illusion of ego, keeping us separated from our true nature, our Buddha-nature, which is enlightened compassion. So no wonder we find it hard to believe that we are loved - at least not as well as we want to be or think we deserve to be. We always want more.

Rumi once described *nafs* as a kind of thief, who steals from a blind man, making him run about without sight or insight, grasping after anything and everything that he thinks will replace what is missing, that will feed his hunger, give him security, or pleasure, or deliver him from his pain. But because we're blind and grasping, we don't move toward what will enlighten our minds, melt our hearts, or deepen our souls; quite the contrary. According to the Sufis, just as love comes in layered forms, so does *nafs* – as anger, arrogance, spite, envy, avarice, hypocrisy, infidelity. Rather like the Seven Deadly.

But there is a path of release. It begins, as all spiritual journeys do, with sorrow, regret, and repentance that one has been so greedy and blind. It begins when you open your eyes and feel your own breathing as a form of love; when you look into the eyes of your companions in life and see in them, perhaps not all the love that you may greedily desire, but at least the same yearning for love that you feel in yourself. And this path of release, which is a release of the love, and the capacity to love that is already in you, ends in joy – in the passionate, ecstatic, sharing of compassion.

Along the way, say the Sufis, you must learn to love even your *nafs* as a kind of blessing. For without doing that, you can't come to love others, or know that all beings, in all of their humanness, are worthy of love and in need of love and yet, even before we begin to love, surrounded by and nourished by love.

Who among us hasn't, at one time or another, been lost? Along the way, the strange thing is that when we are lost, we often try to find ourselves in all the worst ways. By giving

ourselves over to some idolatrous part of life, instead of to life's wholeness: to addiction, to status, to work, to obsession, to worry – whatever. Yet there is also something in life that is always present that can find us, if we will let it. It can come to us in many forms – have we but eyes to see, and ears to hear, and hearts to understand. It finds us and it saves us. And whatever we call it – or choose not to call it – there is nothing you can do to control it, coerce it, manipulate or cajole it. You can only be open to it.

For this is the fourth form that love takes, beyond *eros*, *philia*, and *agape*. It comes as grace. And our response to the unmerited beauty of being itself, our openness to those with whom we share this journey through life, our spiritual capacity for compassionate and passionate living, depends on our openness to all its forms.

To paraphrase the psalmist and then a poet, “O taste and see, that Life is good.”[Ps. 34:8] May we find peace and contentment that's new, until we can both say and show in more than words, “I love you; I'm glad I exist.”

O taste and see, indeed. As we taste these delectable morsels of chocolate, these slices of orange, broken and shared among us, may we receive them as outward and visible signs of the many forms of love that already grace our lives. May they remind us of our craving always for more, until we love even that truth about ourselves, and until we are truly compassionate toward all those with whom we share this human existence. That love may come to us also as inward and spiritual grace, renewing our gratitude for life's manifold beauties, for the friendships we share, and we are renewed in that openness to love which makes for more joyous, more passionate living. Amen, and amen.