

## **Love Minus Zero, No Limit**

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A week ago, on February 12, I stood in the pulpit of the UU Fellowship of St. Croix and conveyed the greetings of this congregation to that one, and I preached this sermon which I liked well enough to recycle here this morning. Our theme that morning, as this one, is love, in that we were then two days before the feast of St. Valentine, and are now five days past it.

So let's start with his story. It is of course, shrouded in legend and who knows what of it is true, but the story goes, in the Second Century of the Common Era, a cruel Roman Emperor named Claudius was concerned because he was running out of soldiers. Claudius was making war on almost everyone around, but he couldn't raise a big enough army. He realized that the young men of Rome would rather make love than war. So he decreed that no marriages could take place in this time of emergency. But Valentine circumvented this decree and went on marrying couples in secret. For this he was arrested, tried and put to death. Since his martyrdom, he has become canonized and is the patron saint of lovers.

*Amor vincit omnia*, said Virgil, love conquers all. We like to think so. In 1935 the Universalists adopted a statement avowing a faith in "God as Eternal and All-Conquering Love." Love, we like to say, is the most powerful force in the universe.

It is also one of the most debased, common, cheap, vulgar words in the language. Most pop tunes are about love, the headlines you see from supermarket tabloids are about love, in a sense. Madison Avenue exploits this little four letter word to sell all kinds of products. Of all the jangly TV commercials that flood my brain, the one that most irritates me is "Love: it's what makes a Subaru a Subaru". Many, probably most of us, have been seriously injured by love at some point in our lives. Yet Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said love was "that force which all of the great religions have seen as the supreme unifying principle of life. Love is somehow the key that unlocks the door which leads to ultimate reality."

The love that is represented by God in Universalist theology is much broader than the love which would induce people to get married, but it includes such love. Christian thought has often distinguished between love as eros, erotic love and love as agape, a selfless love for all humankind supposedly exemplified by Jesus's sacrifice on the cross. I think it's all of a piece.

Love leads us as UUs towards a wider inclusion. If God loves all people too much to damn any to hell, don't we have the obligation to do likewise? There is a straight line from the 1935 Universalist affirmation to our First UU principle, that we covenant to affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person.

But here's the rub: does every person mean every person? There are some people who are a lot more easy to love than others. Do we have to affirm the inherent worth and dignity of our ex-spouses, of the cop that just gave us a ticket

for no good reason, or especially in this fraught season, of someone who voted differently than we did in the last election? And my friends, my people, my fellow travelers on the road of life, I am here to tell you just one thing this morning, the hardest thing a minister has to say: the answer is yes. If love means anything in our faith it means we are called to love those who do not love us. We have to affirm worth and dignity of those who would deny us worth and dignity.

And this is not a new concept; this is not something I just thought up yesterday. This did not even originate with the Universalist affirmation of 1935. It goes all the way back to Jesus. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus said (Matthew 5:44)

“Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.”

He returns to this central teaching in the parable I read a few minutes ago. I am particularly fond of the parable of the Good Samaritan not only because it sheds such powerful light on Jesus’ love command, but also because it stars that most despised of creatures, a lawyer. The lawyer is trying to bait Jesus, to challenge him. He asks how he can inherit the eternal life that Jesus is talking about. Now my own take on this is that the question is really about whether Jesus is going against traditional Judaism or supporting it. Jesus recognizes the trap that has been laid and turns it back on the questioner: what do you read in scripture? In response, the lawyer then recites two different pieces of the Torah. The first has always been considered central to Judaism. It is called the Shema, and devout Jews recite it several times a day: “You shall love God with all your heart with all your soul and with all your mind.”

The other bit of scripture the lawyer appends to the Shema is completely unrelated to it in the Torah, as you can see from the responsive reading we did a few minutes ago: “you shall love your neighbor as yourself.” These words came from that much-deprecated book of Jewish law, Leviticus. In fact, a few verses down from the neighbor love command is this even stronger command, which many of us need to take to heart today:

Leviticus 19:33-4: When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God.

But putting the neighbor love commands together with the God love command of the Shema, as the Gospel writer is doing for the first time, yields a comprehensive ethic for our duty towards a God and our duty towards our fellow humans.

But back to the lawyer. When Jesus approved of his stitching together those two pieces of the Torah, the lawyer still wanted to quibble. “But who is my neighbor?” And Jesus answered that question with the story of the Good Samaritan.

The Samaritans were a despised group to the Jews. They claimed to worship the same God and read the same Torah, but they did not worship at the Jerusalem temple. So they were apostates, people who had diverged from the true faith.

So when Jesus makes the hero of his parable a Samaritan, that is as if he told a contemporary audience the hero was a – pick your category of despised humans, for some it will be child molester, for others a homeless beggar, a foreigner, a Muslim.. A traveler is set upon by thieves, who rob him and leave him for dead beside the road. Now presumably this victim is Jewish, but two members of the Jewish ritual hierarchy encounter him, and rather than giving him any assistance, they pass him by on the other side of the road. It is the despised Samaritan who collects the victim, takes him to a nearby inn, tends to his wounds, and tells the innkeeper that he will pay for an extended stay for the man, who is a complete stranger. And then Jesus asks the lawyer, which one of these was a neighbor to the injured man. The lawyer was trapped and said, the one who showed compassion. Jesus said, you have answered correctly, go and do likewise.

Right, go and do likewise. Friends, it's easy to preach these principles and so, so hard to practice them. I'm there with that lawyer saying, you mean everybody? I gotta love everybody as I love myself. I gotta apply the Golden Rule to everybody, treat everybody as if they had inherent worth and dignity? Democrats Republicans Cape Codders Mainlanders tourists ex-convicts?

Here's the question I think we all are struggling with this Valentine's Day 2017: doesn't love have limits? Those of us happy with the new regime in Washington are unhappy with our fellow Americans who can't seem to accept the results of the election, and those of us unhappy with the regime are watching years of careful work on behalf of human rights threatened. The two sides live in completely different realities. It's easy to love those in our own particular bubble, but how are we supposed to love anyone in the other?

Darwin might help us out here. Evolution favors some altruism, but it is altruism towards our close genetic kin, a kind of tribalism.

If what Jesus is preaching is truly a universal love, it goes against the grain of those instincts favored by evolution. In other words, we humans have evolved as tribal creatures, and this last political campaign demonstrates how effectively those tribal instincts can be mobilized against the more universalizing ethic.

Darwin's evolution, then, is one kind of limit on love, and it's one we can overcome only by recognizing that there is a certain human nature and that the ethic Jesus preached requires us to evolve further.

Abe Lincoln bears on this too. In his Gettysburg Address, at the hinge point of our national progress, Lincoln redefined the purpose of America: it was conceived in liberty and dedicated to the equality of all people. As I've said before, Lincoln's basic religious faith seems to have been Transcendentalism, which accepts that there is inevitably a gap between our ideals and the realities on the ground. In Lincoln's era, this gap between America's promise of equality and the reality of slavery had come to a head in a terrible war which was consuming the flower of a generation.

The Union Army eventually won that war, but Abe Lincoln was assassinated and race relations advanced and then slid back. Progress has been made but there is still a large gap between our ideals and the reality of life in America.

And I think the same can be said of the universal love preached by Jesus and embraced by our Unitarian and Universalist heritage. We are fighting our own tribal instincts, and we will never achieve perfect love. Whether we're talking about love between spouses, between parents and children, within a church or other community or on social media, the love we practice will always be imperfect. Sometimes we'll have to press the reset button, and begin again in love. As the hymn we sang puts it, there is more love somewhere.

Are there limits to love? You bet. There are limits imposed by human nature, and by our own arrangements. Sixteen years ago I stood in front of an altar and said my wedding vows to Jacqueline; by those vows I voluntarily limited myself in a certain kind of love, I granted her a monopoly on those affections. It's been a pretty good arrangement so far. Yes there are all kinds of limits on love for all kinds of reasons.

And yet I want to think of love in the most transcendent way, as something that undergirds all that we do and all we are. There are no theoretical limits to love. We swim in love as a fish swims in the sea.

Maybe our ad slogan should be: "Love, it's what makes a UU a UU." But of course there are good people of all religious persuasions and none who try to live by love.

Love Minus Zero: No Limit. Yes, of course I stole the title of this sermon from our Nobel Prize-winning poet Bob Dylan. It expresses that ideal I want to believe in. Love from which nothing is subtracted, minus zero, and which has no outer bounds. I think there are some among us who get close to experiencing love that way, and I try to live my life so I can too.

I don't believe in a literal life after death, but I do believe that every word and deed of each of us creates reactions like ripples in the ocean of time, and that those ripples remain in motion causing things long after we are gone. My colleague Fred Small wrote a wonderful song with the line, "the only measure of your words and your deeds will be the love you leave behind when you're done."

Look, love is so much more than words; it's the way we live our lives, it's what we feel, it's what we do. The words of Dylan's song are not as apt as his title for the type of love I am trying to describe here, but there is a certain resonance. The lyrics speak of a woman who personifies love, but it is a peculiarly passive and distant woman until the last verse, when his love is "like some raven at my window with a broken wing;" that image, evoking Edgar Allan Poe's famous poem, is at once of warning and vulnerability like the victim in the Samaritan story. Dylan's ideal love embodies many opposites: she speaks like silence, she laughs like the flowers valentines can't buy her, she knows there's no success like failure, she knows too much to argue or to judge.

Love, Dylan seems to be suggesting, has the power to reconcile the opposites within which we are sometimes trapped. Maybe it has the power to reconcile us to our fellow Americans in these days when we seem anything but indivisible. As I was thinking over these lines, I heard echoes of that great essay on love from 2000 years ago, St. Paul's description in 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 13, which we just read earlier in the service. So I thought I might mash the two together,

Dylan and St. Paul, to see if it might shed a little light on this vast and spongy subject of love, and I'll close by laying on you this verbal collage:

1 If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.

My love, she speaks like silence  
Without ideals or violence

2 And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing.

She doesn't have to say she's faithful  
But she's true, like ice, like fire,

3 If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body to be burned, but do not have love, I gain nothing

People carry roses  
Make promises by the hours  
My love, she laughs like the flowers  
Valentines can't buy her

4 Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant  
5 or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful;  
6 it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth.

In the dime stores and bus stations  
People talk of situations  
Read books, repeat quotations  
Draw conclusions on the wall,  
Some speak of the future  
My love, she speaks softly  
She knows there's no success like failure  
And that failure's no success at all.

7 It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.  
8 Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end.  
9 For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part;  
10 but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end.

Cloak and dagger dangles  
Madams light the candles

In ceremonies of the horsemen  
Even a pawn must hold a grudge  
Statues made of matchsticks  
Crumble into one another  
My love winks, she does not bother  
She knows too much to argue or to judge

11 When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways.

12 For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known.

The bridge at midnight trembles  
The country doctor rambles  
Bankers' nieces seek perfection  
Expecting all the gifts that wise men bring  
The wind howls like a hammer  
The night blows cold and rainy  
My love, she's like some raven  
At my window with a broken wing

13 And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

Amen.

Reading: Luke 10

25 Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he said, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" 26 He said to him, "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" 27 He answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself." 28 And he said to him, "You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live."

29 But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" 30 Jesus replied, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. 31 Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. 32 So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. 33 But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. 34 He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. 35 The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, 'Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.' 36 Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the

hands of the robbers?" 37 He said, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise."