



A sermon by Stephen Atkinson, Minister

February 10, 2008

THE PLACE OF LOVE

Last week I talked about the summer of 1969 and my visit to Newfoundland to compete in the National Finals of *Reach for the Top*. As it happened, that same summer, barely 10 days after I returned from that trip, I headed out with other New Brunswick soon-to-be-senior high school students who were selected to be Young Voyageurs, a Federal Government-sponsored Program, which perhaps began as a Centennial project, I'm not sure. For some years, each summer groups of students were selected from each province, and I imagine at least one from the Territories. Our travel and meals, all by rail, were paid for; we populated CN passenger cars across the country. Each provincial locality also hosted a group visiting its province; those who came to Fredericton were from all over Saskatchewan.

So one summer morning, my parents and I, and a friend of mine from school and her parents, drove partway across New Brunswick to this little train station in the middle of nowhere; the CN line went through and picked up passengers there. We joined some others from different towns in central NB and all those who'd begun the trip further south; we picked up more teens as we went north and west across the province, till there were 24 of us and a teacher and his wife who acted as chaperones. We were all headed towards the scintillating destination of Trail, British Columbia!

Now, it's a long way from McGivney, New Brunswick to Kamloops, from where it's another long way via bus down to Trail, especially long in the interior's July heat. During that journey, this group, only a few of us knowing even one other member before we boarded the train, forged the kind of bond that we tend to do during youth and only on rare occasion thereafter. Today such a group might be more sexualized, and even in our more innocent times the most muscular and handsome young man and the most dramatically pretty young girl bonded at the wrist within seconds of laying eyes on each other. But the rest of us became a 22-headed single body of teenaged energy and affection; we sang and laughed, and joked and laughed, and we loved to sing and laugh and joke, and we loved loving it. In Trail, the local teens hosting us joined all this simple lovingness, and then we all even loved being Canadian together, the NB kids and the BC kids sharing the same affection for our country, still fresh from its own love fest of Centennial year. Ah yes, it was a veritable orgy of indiscriminate chastity.

Last weekend, some of us saw up close how our Unitarian Universalist youth feel and behave when they gather and I thought immediately about that summer. And about my first year at Mt. Allison University when, having faced the obstacle course of initiation, my frosh colleagues bonded to each other and that beloved place. And about my early years in the Gay and Lesbian Psychiatrists Association and the equivalent Medical Association, when we were just emerging and establishing our respectability within the larger world of our profession; across the continent we made fast friendships. And about the drama class I was in at the University of New Brunswick, me a 48 year old man among more than a dozen young twenty-something students, all loving our mutual creative courage. And about seminary where those who began in the same year, plus some from the years ahead and behind became so deeply appreciative of each other, joyful just to be together and so forgiving and passionate.

Those youth last weekend and these memories of mine also made me think of the Unitarian Universalist congregations that I have been part of. It made me think about whether the members of those congregations love each other. It hit me that the word 'love' doesn't appear anywhere in our statement of principles, although it does appear twice in our sources. I find myself wondering what happened to 'love' in the transition from the sources of our faith, wisdom and vision to the principles we affirm and promote. I ask myself and I ask you: what is the place of love?

Now, I don't doubt that at least some of us, if not all of us, love at least some of us, if not all of us. I've been here a short time in this special position and many of you have known each other, partied and celebrated and mourned and cried together for many years. I'm not questioning that there is love here, and it wouldn't be my place to question it even if I wanted to. In a way, whether you love each other is a private matter. How we treat each other here and how we work together *is* a public matter that is my business, but not how you actually feel for each other over your years of friendship. So, apart from that love which comes from familiarity and survival and joy and helping each other, here among us and in what we do, what is the place of love?

In the English language we have one word, love, which may be categorized with adjectives, but isn't itself specific. That's why we can have romantic comedies that turn around the confusion of what someone means when they say, "I love you." The Greeks, those classic classifiers, had three words for love, so their meaning was always clear; maybe that's why we still study them so much, we have clarity-envy.

The broadest Greek word is *philos*, most translatable by our single English word 'love'. The kind of love I remember from the summer of 1969 and from seminary and other times; the kind that I do see among you, and feel towards you as a congregation and towards many of you personally – all that is *philos*. This kind of

love also fuels our hospitality towards new folk and often our readiness to work together on projects we might find dull or onerous on our own.

But, you know, not all people are comfortable with general affection and warm relationships, and not all those who seem to be so loving and accepting are being truly sincere. In the first case, it's important we respect the natural or learned reservations we come across in someone; it does not mean that she is less committed, attached or dedicated. It's a personal style, frequently based on a different sense of what's private and appropriate.

Degrees of insincerity are not necessarily false or duplicitous either; someone may be trying to fit into ways of behaving with others that aren't yet natural for him. Fear might force a person to act like she feels affection when in truth she has to continue to protect herself. Then, too, there are those who cannot help but be driven by a hunger for power, and will hide that behind a guise of good will, perhaps not even realizing what they're doing.

Philos, this generalized form of love, is the most obvious and common among people as a whole and our congregation in particular. Many of us have experienced though that this is not characteristic of all Unitarian Universalist communities. This is so especially for me when I remember back to the years when I was Bahá'í, and found a truly amazing sense of love and acceptance in every Bahá'í community I encountered. The sense of having a very specific purpose in common and a relatively unique view of the world seemed to break down a lot of the usual reservations between strangers, and in those years I felt deeply that I was part of a loving community.

I don't know if that's a standard that Unitarian Universalists ought to aim for, or even if it still exists among the Bahá'ís; after all, I was a young man then and hadn't developed an adult sense of propriety and proportion, nor had I learned that it can be good to be cautious. I do think that we can never take *philos* for granted in our own community, nor should we forget that it is a crucial part of what we offer to those who are seeking something more from life. This is worth saying because, as I see it, *philos* in our principles is rather watered down into "acceptance of one another," and I think that is far from enough to build a vital community.

What drenches our principles and motivates so much of what we do in the world is a different kind of love; the Greeks called it *agape*. We break it down into grand concepts of justice, equity, compassion, peace and liberty, but at root this is *agape*.

For centuries now this word has been associated with 'Christian' love, the love that Jesus taught we should feel towards our neighbours and by extension towards all people. Of course, Jesus was only quoting the *Torah*, the books of law in the Hebrew scriptures when he said, "Love thy neighbour as thyself." In

recent years, many Christians, especially among the young and the Christian centre and left, have started to realize that their focus has strayed too much from this over-arching love of all; they are moving away from harsh and narrow attention on specific evils and back towards the old practice of aiding the disadvantaged and the new practice of beneficial stewardship of the environment.

Agape, this broad form of loving concern for all human beings appears also in the Eastern religions, so truly it means something more like 'universal love' or love of humankind; Buddhist, environmental and indigenous religious influence today extends *agape* towards the love of all sentient beings and even of the living system that is our whole planet.

But, there are people who are public examples of charity, social justice and concern for fellow human beings who behave just horribly towards people close to them. Some of us have no doubt heard stories of physicians, for example, who'll get out of bed in the middle of the night to perform emergency surgery and are loved by the community for it, yet are totally unavailable emotionally to their own children. This is an imbalance between *philos*, which includes the love of family, and *agape*. We here must each be aware that our loving feelings towards each other must spill out into the community, but also that our goodwill towards strangers has to be applied with equal fervour to those sitting right beside us.

The Greeks have one other word for love. In case you haven't noticed, Valentine's Day is coming up. We've got roses here on the chancel and hearts hanging in the narthex back there. Flowers and chocolates will fly off the shelves this week. We all know that third word; like all the really honest words it's got four little letters in it. It's *eros*: romance, limerence, falling in love and having sex! Brothers and sisters, I tell you there is LUST in this very room! (Now that I've said that, I do hope I'm not just speaking for myself.)

We're Unitarians! We offered sex education as soon as we figured out that some of us needed tutoring. We believe in condoms and safe sex and reproductive choice; we don't believe in original sin. We think the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge should be grown organically and distributed locally. Put it in the school cafeterias. A healthy part of every diet. "Hazel, we're having a potluck this Saturday. Can you bring your Fruit of Knowledge tarts? I haven't had one in *such* a long time."

Is it fair to use the metaphor that erotic energy moves the universe? Even atoms join and burst open with passion. Carbon is the sexiest element of all. It's always bonding: pairs, chains, circles, you name it! Seducing other elements into producing new and varied offspring. And carbon is really into absorption and lubrication.

Those who say God is Love don't mean *philos* or even *agape*. They mean *eros*; love that endlessly creates; love that thirsts for contact; love that engenders more love. It is not by chance that many of the great works of mystic literature, based on actual human experiences of something not yet explained, are filled with erotic imagery. You find this in the Hebrew Bible, in St. Theresa of Avila and Rumi, in Hindu scriptures and pagan and classical myths. Whether it is a natural drive to reproduction that inspires the experiences and stories, or whether nature is a product of an essential power of creativity, *eros* fuels it all.

Unitarian Universalists may not agree about whether God exists, but we agree that the Devil does not. The joke goes that Unitarians believe that there is *at most* one god! There is no destructive, anti-life, anti-creative force that lures away the human spirit. Human nature is essentially good, though human failure is real; it can warp the soul. What potentially forms and even transforms us moves most clearly through human relationships and the highest ideals of human society.

Philos is helpful; *agape* is lofty; but *eros* is passionate! And that's how it has a place in our church. If we don't create a loving community passionately, if we don't serve All That We Find Ultimate passionately, there's barely any point in doing it.

What is the place of love in our church? It's right there; right in the centre of things; in the heart of us all, as it is in All That Is. *Philos*, *agape* and *eros*: all have their place here. We must know that and practice that.

May it be so among us.