

FEBRUARY 14, 2016

Sunday Sermon: “Everything’s Possible”

Rev. Dr. Len De Roche

W.H. Auden said:

"Will it come like a change in the weather?

Will its greeting be courteous or rough?

Will it alter my life altogether?

O tell me the truth about love.

Eskimos or the Inuit people of Canada and Alaska have at least twenty-four words for snow. Each word refines the overall concept of snow in some way. There will be a term for the powdery light snow, for the heavy wet snow, for snow before a storm, another for snow after a storm, another for snow lying in a certain direction, another for snow at a certain season of the year. The precision of the language of snow is necessary for a people whose life depends upon being able to live with it. We on the other hand only need one word to describe snow because it is not deemed significant enough in our lives to have defined it further. In other words, language develops to meet the demand of our living, our culture, in this our church. Words allow us to think and express who we are, and the one we find our society almost obsessed with is the word “love.”

You can hardly pick up a paper or magazine or watch a television show that does not try to express some nuance of love. Even and especially our commercial efforts as seen in advertisements to sell us everything from shower units to soap powder, from salvation to Celicas, from gym shoes to bottled beer, are really trying to interest us in sex and love. Look at the super bowl ads from last week: Honda, a new truck to Love, the fragrance Axe, and the Coca Cola with love commercial. Imagine an alien press, their supermarket tabloid headlines: “Extra scoop: Humans Obsessed with Love,” or “Humans Worship Love” or “Human Development Stifled by Emotional Attraction” or “Earth Dominated by Love.” Yet they would find this one four-letter word, love, for which Webster’s Dictionary had 19 separate definitions, so inadequate to describe what we mean by love.

The Greeks, well the ancient Greeks anyway, were wiser; they had several ways of expressing the English word 'love.' They spoke of *philia*, which perhaps translates into English as friendship, or brotherhood. They also spoke of *eros*, that deeply emotional attraction and romance that can include sexual desire.

Then the Greeks further added a word for which there seems to be no equivalent in English; they spoke of *agape*. By this they meant a quality of non-erotic love, as of God for humankind or of humankind for humankind or for one another that continues to give itself even when no love is returned. We are thinking here about an utterly selfless love, or the unrequited and unconditional love. This is the rarest type of love, but English still uses one word for the emotion.

Writers from all walks of life have pondered the meaning and written about love in an attempt to understand this feeling and we may use their words to help us understand the emotion. Artists like William Shakespeare, who said 'Love comforteth like sunshine after rain,' and 'O Love's not time's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks, within his bending sickle's compass come; Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,' but bears it out even to the edge of doom.'

William Blake put it this way, 'and we are put on earth a little space, that we may learn to bear the beams of love.'

Dostoevsky stated, 'What is hell? The suffering that comes from the consciousness that one is no longer able to love.'

And your native Kathryn Hepburn, the actress whose many roles helped define for two generations of movie watchers the meaning of love, said in her autobiography, 'It seems to me I discovered what "I love you" really means. It means I put you and your interests and your comfort ahead of my own interests and my own comfort because I love you.... Love has nothing to do with what you are expecting to get-only with what you are expecting to give-which is everything. What you receive in return varies.... If you are very lucky, you may be loved back. That is delicious but it does not necessarily happen.'

Saints wanted to help understand the many fold mean of love. St Thomas of Aquinas wrote, 'to love anyone is nothing else than to wish that person good,' but St. Augustine said, 'it is love that asks, that seeks, that knocks, that finds and that is faithful to what it finds.' The Spaniard, St John of the Cross said, "Oh night that joined Beloved with lover, Lover transformed in the Beloved!

And St. Teresa said, 'make many acts of love, for they set the soul on fire and make it gentle.'

Mother Teresa before her death said of love, 'Our work brings people face to face with love.' Even Theologians and philosophers wrote about love. Rudolf Bultmann said, 'The existentialist analysis can do nothing more than make it clear to me that I can understand love only by loving.' And the Humanist Bertrand Russell contributed 'To fear love is to fear life, and those who fear life are already three parts dead.' Theologian H.H. Kelly said, 'Love is not a thing you do or come to. It comes to you. It overcomes you.... Where faith meets hope love is born.' The Christian Theologian, Willimon quips, 'Christian love is not a stupid unwillingness to look at the world as it is. It is the recognition that, because the world is as it is, nothing less than love will do.'

I even found a lawyer who talked about love, granted not from this or the last century. Benjamin Disraeli said, 'We are all born for love; it is the principle of existence and its only end.' And the freedom fighter and statesman Martin Luther King, Jr. in his Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech commented that 'Man must evolve for all human conflict a method which rejects revenge, aggression and retaliation. The foundation of such a method is love.'

I even looked for what an engineer might have written about love, but understandingly couldn't find any quotes. But the biologist Lewis Thomas found that 'There is a tendency for living things to join up, establish linkages, live inside each other, return to earlier arrangements, get along, whenever possible. This is a way of the world.' And therapist, C.G. Jung said, 'In my medical experience as well as in my own life I have again and again been faced with the mystery of love, and have never been able to explain what it is.... Love "bears all things" and "endures all things" according to Corinthians. These words say all there is to be said; nothing can be added to them.'

And Viktor Frankl, after his experience of the holocaust retorted 'A thought transfixed me: for the first time in my life I saw the truth - that love is the ultimate and the highest goal to which man can aspire. Then I grasped the meaning of the greatest secret that human poetry and human thought and belief have to impart: The salvation of man is through love and in love.' And even the soldier Omar Bradley had an opinion on love when he wrote 'We have grasped the mystery of the atom and rejected the Sermon on the Mount.'

Every part of humanity is concerned with defining and finding and experiencing, and giving testimonials on love. You heard Rumi, the Bible, and Kaaren Anderson's story of a wedding, and will hear love songs of musicians like Lennon and McCartney.

This apparent obsession with love is because it is probably the most important emotion that we humans exhibit. Falling in love (eros) is like hooking 10,000 volts up to a 110 volt structure. For a short time, the structure will operate in a highly enhanced manner. This 10,000 volt experience can make love the most powerful religious experience we can endure. But there is a difference between being in love and the 10,000 volt experience of falling in love. "To fall in love is to project that particularly golden part of one's shadow, the image of God...whether masculine or feminine-onto another person" Most relationships in the west begin with this projection, go through a period of disillusionment when we discover our lovers are indeed human, and finally come back to that 110 volt human level of loving. Then we experience it all over again with children and through our children.

This was expressed to me in a James Thurber cartoon in which a middle-aged husband and wife confronted one another with the words, "Well, who took the magic out of it?"

Romantic love or falling in love (eros), which Valentine's Day celebrates, is different from loving, which is always a quieter and a more humanly proportioned experience. There is always something overblown and bigger-than-life about falling in love. Valentine's Day attempts to bring us back to the 10,000 volt experience.

All humans and human actions have a shadow side and love is no exception. "When in-loveness turns into its opposite, there is nothing more bitter in human experience." "Romeo and Juliet" that is playing at the Hartford Stage is probably the greatest Love theme in all of world Literature; yet it is a tragedy. In fact, any day's news report probably has a story about that shadow side of love, domestic abuse being one of the most numerous of all criminal actions, which interestingly occurs most often on Super Bowl Sunday. This is the shadow you can be under when you are in the 10,000 volt experience.

We can only appreciate love as part of our stories. So here are two stories that I witnessed that seem to me to express love.

In the summer of 1994 I worked as a Chaplain in a regional hospital in north central Pennsylvania. There were six of us learning to be Chaplains and serving this hospital of about 200 beds. One day as the summer ended the Chaplains office got a call for a rabbi. Well, our small staff of Chaplains included one nun, one Evangelical Lutheran, one Presbyterian, one Dutch Reformed, two Southern Baptists and one UU, me. So I answered the call to the Critical Care Unit and hoped they wouldn't require me to pronounce anything in Hebrew. In the room I meet a short Jewish man in his 80's and his son and daughter who were my age. The patient was their mother. For the next two days I almost lived in their room. The mother had had a stroke that left her paralyzed and unable to speak. It was the end of the summer and their rabbi was out of the area on vacation and they could not get in touch with him. This couple had been married for over 55 years. They were both very religious; the wife had converted from Catholicism before their marriage. Anyway the husband had to make the decision of whether to place his wife on life support. In other words, he was asked if he wished his wife of 55 years hooked up to all sorts of tubes and drips when the prognosis was that she would never really get any better. We talked for hours and he told me about their life and how they had agreed that the quality of life was important to each of them and how they would not permit each other to be hooked to machines. I listened to his children remind their father what they had decided and how their mom would want to be let go. For him love was not being able to let go. Not being able to let go of a lifetime of memories and love.

Four years later in another hospital, this time in Chicago, I was called to another Critical Care unit of a 54 year old man, Edward Auge. Mr. Auge was a cancer patient who had fallen into a coma. He had had lots of Chemo-therapy and radiation and had lost his hair quite a while ago. The photo on the bureau next to the desk showed that he had been a big man, but was now much lighter. I spent the night in this room too. Edward lived an interesting life, born in Argentina of French/Irish parents. He was educated in Mexico and was a true international man. He spoke many European languages and had worked for Swiss Air in international negotiations. He had first contracted leukemia in 1972 and had fought it off for 25 years.

With him was his 20-year old daughter and his ex-wife. They had been divorced for 12 years but when he developed his cancer again she had quit her job in New York in order to be with him this last year. Around the bed holding his inanimate hands they told me of his life. His ex told me, he was her best friend. His daughter told me about the crazy things Edward used to do. His life with cancer had defined his actions. He lived each day as if it were his last. Their stories told me of their love. Their adventures told me of their caring. Their caring told of their lives together. He died while they held his hands and I conducted a memorial service three days later as he lived with more stories, French wine and the music of Cat Stevens. That service was an expression of love. As W.H. Auden said,

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The late Rev. Peter Fleck said it in this way ‘We live by the grace of being known to others, lovingly. We give life to others by knowing them, lovingly. There is a reciprocity, a mutuality of knowing. And it is this mutuality that upholds life.’ And with love everything’s possible.

In an ever-evolving and never-ending world. Amen.