

Plymouth Unitarians
Sunday Service 13th February 2022
True Love

Opening music = <https://youtu.be/vXFNudDz0rk>

Spiritual Tour by Il Sognatore

Opening words =

*“If I speak in the tongues of mortals and angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. 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. If I give away my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I have nothing”. **1 Corinthians 13***

Welcome

Good morning – it is an honour and privilege to be leading today’s service and I would like to welcome each of you and thank you for your presence today.

I am pleased you are here – whether you are here live in the church or virtually via Zoom (wave!) or joining us after today through the recorded or written word.

I hope you are feeling loved where you are and if you are feeling heavy in heart or spirit then I hope this service provides you some comfort. If you are new here, then you are especially welcome.

Today’s opening words were no doubt recognisable by some of you. They are from Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians - from the first verses of chapter 13 - **The Gift of Love.**

I chose these words as today I want to invite us to reflect on love and what it means to us to love and be loved.

Chalice lightening =

I will now light our chalice which we do at each service. The chalice is the symbol of our free religious faith, its light a reminder of the divine spark we each have. If you are at home and you have a candle then please do light a candle.

Symbol of light and knowledge,

Symbol of warmth and freedom;

We light this chalice as a symbol of our faith.

Here we gather to celebrate hope, and the infinite possibilities of love.

Rev. Tom Goldsmith of the First Unitarian Church in Salt Lake City used this chalice lighting at Sunday worship for 34 years before retiring.

Our first hymn of the day we sang a couple of weeks ago – there is only a musical accompaniment so please sing proud and loud.

1st Hymn = Love will guide us – Purple (98) words by Sally Rogers

Introduction =

As I said, today I want us to take time to reflect on love. Given that tomorrow is Valentine's Day it seemed an appropriate service theme. Nowadays on Valentine's Day people generally give gifts and cards to illustrate the love they hold for one another or people spend time doing something with loved ones to celebrate. Valentine's Day is a day where love is certainly in the spotlight. **But what is love?**

In Ancient Greece when writing of love philosophers Plato and Aristotle recognised that love comes in different forms such as familial love between family members, the love of friendship, self-love and romantic love.

The imagery of Valentine's used in mainstream advertising tends to bring to mind romantic love whilst promoting bouquets of red roses, boxes of chocolates and weekend breaks.

However, Valentines is now widely promoted to incorporate everyone whether in a romantic relationship or not. I have had emails this week promoting Valentine' menus as well as urging me to do something for myself like a hot bath (wouldn't you know they have just the bath salts I could try) or suggesting I carry out a Random Act of Kindness on a stranger.

People's understanding of love and our desire to explore its theme has continued throughout history and into the 21st century. If you go to a bookstore or cinema, you will be near guaranteed to find something to read or watch which has love as a central theme. We are still asking ourselves the question – what is love?

A few weeks ago, Jennifer gave us some paper to jot down something that had transformed us and the qualities we can bring to our church community.

Now I invite you to take a few minutes to reflect on what comes to mind when I say the words True Love. Here in church everyone should have a paper heart and pencil to hand and hopefully those of you joining us on Zoom have been forewarned of the need so are poised with pen and paper.

What comes to mind when you think of True Love?

Have a minute or so to think and jot down what the words True Love bring to mind.

Thank you ☐

So – I am curious what you have written. Perhaps you wrote down colours, places, times, names, past-times, relationships or perhaps you wrote of its qualities and characteristics like Paul goes on to do in chapter 13 of his first letter to those early Christians in Corinth:

“Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude...it rejoices in the truth and endures all things.” 1 Corinthians 13

Perhaps you thought of love in its active form from volunteering for a charity or sharing your last Rolo with a loved one.

I am wondering if anyone would like to share what they have written at the lectern. You can just say the word, or you can provide an explanation if you wish (and can) as to why that came to mind.

Those of you on Zoom – if anyone wishes to share then please also make it known to **Myron/Steve/Kate** and we can have you spot-lighted on the screen.

Thank you all for sharing and taking part – it is appreciated.

If no one wishes to share I do have a couple of quotes about love I can read out:

“Love is the bridge between you and everything”. **Rumi**

“You can never love another person unless you are equally involved in the beautiful but difficult spiritual work of learning to love yourself”. **John O Donohue**

As well as it being Valentine’s Day tomorrow, Tuesday is Nirvana Day. Nirvana Day is a day when Buddhists all around the world celebrate Buddha entering Nirvana upon the death of his physical body at the age of 80 after teaching for 40 years upon reaching enlightenment. On Tuesday many people will reflect on the Buddha’s life and teachings and how they can apply them to their own lives.

I mention this because the Buddha’s teachings on love have inspired me deeply and I will say more about them after today’s story.

Kate is reading the story and it is called *The Golden Rule* and is written by Unitarian Universalist Ilene Cooper.

Reading/story = *The Golden Rule* by Ilene Cooper

Maya was eight years old and had rules to follow all day long. At school there were special rules.

At school Maya had to raise their hand to talk. They could only eat if it was lunch or snack time. They needed a bathroom pass if they wanted to go to the bathroom. And, they were not allowed to copy anyone else's work.

Maya also had special rules at home.

Maya had to go to bed at eight o'clock. They were never allowed to hit their younger sibling (even if their sibling hit first). They had to eat vegetables. And, they could watch television for half an hour every day.

There were also special rules at their congregation.

Maya was not allowed to run during coffee hour. They had to talk in an indoor voice. And, they were expected to be friendly and welcoming to everyone. Maya was sick and tired of all those rules! One day, Maya decided they wanted just *one* rule to follow—one very important rule, to take the place of all of those other rules.

Maya asked their Uncle Guna what he thought was the most important rule of all. He told them that in his religion, Hinduism, it is said, "This is the sum of duty: to do nothing to others which would cause them pain."

Maya asked their next-door-neighbour, Claire, what they thought was the most important rule of all. Claire told Maya that a teacher from the Buddhist religion had said, "Do not do to others what would hurt you."

Maya asked their best friend, Adam, what they thought was the most important rule. Adam told Maya that at their Jewish synagogue they learned that Hebrew scripture teaches, "You shall love thy neighbour as thyself." Another friend, Maria, told Maya they learned the same rule at her Catholic church.

Maya asked their friend, Malik, what they thought was the most important rule. Malik said that in their religion, Islam, people say, "None of you truly believes until he wishes for his brother what he wishes for himself."

Maya asked their Uncle Greg what he thought was the most important rule. Uncle Greg said that when he does pagan magic, he always follows the rule, "An ye harm none, do what you will." He told Maya this means he cannot do anything that would hurt another living being.

Maya thought about all of the answers they had heard. Maya wrote them down, one at a time.

"This is the sum of duty: to do nothing to others which would cause them pain." (Hinduism)

"Do not do to others what would hurt you." (Buddhism)

"Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself." (Jewish and Christian)

"None of you truly believes until he wishes for his brother what he wishes for himself."
(Islam)

"An ye harm none, do what you will." (Neo-pagan)

On Sunday morning Maya took the list of rules to their Unitarian Universalist congregation. Maya showed it to the minister, Rev. Marta, and asked Rev. Marta which rule she thought was most important.

Rev. Marta said, "I notice that these rules are all very similar. They are different versions of a rule some people call 'the Golden Rule.' What do you think is the most important rule?"

Maya paused for a moment. Then Maya said slowly, "I think love is the Golden Rule. When we are loving, then we do not hurt other people or cause them pain, we wish for others what we wish for ourselves, and we love our neighbours as ourselves."

"That sounds like the most important rule to me!" Rev. Marta agreed. "Love is the Golden Rule."

Address =

I agree with Maya and Marta – Love is the Golden Rule and one I think we should apply to all beings and the world we live in.

(shared on screen) Norman Rockwell's 1961 oil painting *Golden Rule* is of a group of people of different religions, races and ethnicity together behind the inscription "*Do Unto Others as You Would Have Them Do unto You.*" After a life full of travelling wherein Norman had always felt welcomed and studying comparative religion, he felt this reflected his own value system. I sought out a print of this picture after discovering it during my own studies in college as I felt it echoed my own beliefs on the unity of love at the heart of life.

For me love cannot be separated from my understanding of the divine as I see both love and the divine as a sustaining force that helps guide me. The story *The Golden Rule* gave us the what to live – our purpose if you like but not the how. I found my how in the Buddhist tradition.

Vietnamese Buddhist Thich Nhat Hanh (tick not han) wrote a book exploring the four elements of True Love within the Buddhist tradition and recommendations on how to cultivate them. Spoiler alert – adopting a regular meditation practice was his principal recommendation.

However, besides having a regular meditation practice I believe we can develop the skills in our day-to-day interactions.

The four elements of True Love in the Buddhist tradition are **lovingkindness, compassion, joy, and freedom**. I will be focusing on Lovingkindness and compassion today as they have been the cornerstone of my own practice.

Lovingkindness is the capacity to offer happiness. By practicing lovingkindness, you are opening your heart and offering happiness to yourself and others.

According to the Buddha, the key to offering happiness and therefore lovingkindness is through understanding. To practice True Love, we need to understand ourselves and others at a deep level.

If you do not understand what causes someone pain and suffering or what their deepest dreams or aspirations are then you will not be able to love them as you will not truly know them. So how do we go about this?

Firstly, we can listen attentively. Often in conversation we are only partially paying attention; we are thinking about what we are going to say in response or perhaps of what else we need to do that day. Listening attentively sends a powerful message to the person talking. It says that what they are saying matters – that they matter.

Another powerful tool which boosts this is asking questions – most importantly - how are you? This applies to you too! Ask yourself how you are and really listen. Do not be put off if you find people do not open up straight away or you don't hear yourself saying anything. It may have been a while since someone asked or since they felt the person asking really wanted to hear.

Both meditation practices and developing active-listening skills take time – they are a long-term commitment which last a lifetime. There is always room to develop or maintain your abilities. Take the active-listening for example – you may find it relatively easy doing so when you are having a good day and when what your loved one is talking about interests you. On the other hand, if you are in a distracted mood and the subject is one you find hard to follow then you may struggle to be attentive. Your intention may not be to ignore them but your actions are not recognising the other person.

Now imagine the person you are listening to is someone you have had a fraught relationship with, someone who you find it hard to be around. Imagine being able to attentively listen to them and actively open your heart to them. I wholeheartedly believe it can be achieved but like all worthwhile changes in behaviour it does take hard-work and commitment. A way to help see someone lovingly is to remind yourself that they were a baby once – an innocent child who has learnt along the way that love is not enough or that they are not enough. Under their anger or jealousy or fear is someone deserving of love and you can remind them of that. By doing so you are harnessing the second element – compassion.

Compassion helps ease pain and can transform suffering. Like lovingkindness we can improve our ability to be compassionate by being attentive - by listening, seeing and hearing others deeply. Having knowledge and understanding of others help us see how small caring actions can have huge impacts. By being more present during interactions with others you are more likely to notice opportunities for compassionate action.

Thinking back to today's story again, specifically about 'Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself'. I am confident that you all saw or heard how lockdown unlocked the deep compassionate nature within so many.

During lockdown thousands of people's usual busy routines changed. This provided them with the space and the opportunity to notice what and who was around them. People all around the world were reported to be practicing acts of kindness and helping ease the world's pain by reaching out to neighbours and communities in considerate loving ways. Even people whose routine was busier not quieter were doing this. I remember news articles highlighting key workers who after or even before their day-job they were out helping at food-banks or walking pets of housebound neighbours. By applying love whilst being fully present and noticing another's difficulty we are guided naturally to lend a helping hand or listening ear.

The key thing I think to keep in mind is that love, True Love is not some abstract concept or something that can be achieved through your marital status or a meal out on Valentines. True Love requires a commitment of active participation wherein first you recognise the divine nature within yourself and then you can recognise it in others. Once you can see this you then make time to send happiness out into the world and make an effort to interact in an attentive caring way.

Like all practical exercises training is required. To love truly and deeply we need to put the work in to see results. And the results are worth it.

True Love is the gift which keeps on giving. In loving ourselves and loving others as ends in themselves as opposed to means to an end then those we love pass it on.

We will now have today's **prayer** which was inspired by Corinthians Chapter 13. After the prayer will be a period of silent reflection followed by some accompanying music.

I welcome Kate back to read today's prayer. The prayer is by writer Holley Gerth and it is called *Prayer of Commitment*.

Prayer =

Prayer of Commitment (inspired by 1 Corinthians 13: 1-13)

By Holley Gerth

Lord,

Because love is patient...

Help me to be slow to judge, but quick to listen,
hesitant to criticize, but eager to encourage,
remembering your endless patience with me.

Because love is kind...

Help my words to be gentle and my actions to be thoughtful.
Remind me to smile and to say "Please" and "Thank You"
because those little things still mean so much.

Because love does not envy or boast, and it is not proud...

Help me have a heart that is humble and sees the good in others.
May I celebrate and appreciate all that I have and all that I am,
as well as doing the same for those around me.

Because love is not rude or self-seeking...

Help me to speak words that are easy on the ear and on the heart.
When I'm tempted to get wrapped up in my own little world,
remind me there's a great big world out there full of needs and hurts.

Because love is not easily angered and keeps no record of wrongs...

Help me to forgive others as you have forgiven me.
When I want to hold onto a grudge,

gently help me release it
so I can reach out with a hand of love instead.

Because love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth...
Help me stand up for what is right and good.
May I defend the defenceless, and help the helpless.
Show me how I can make a difference.

Because love always protects and always trusts...
Help me to be a refuge for those around me.
When the world outside is harsh and cold,
may my heart be a place of acceptance and warmth.

Finally, because love always perseveres...
Help my heart continually beat with love for You and others.
Thank you for showing us what the word love really means.

Amen.

Period of Reflection.

Accompanying music <https://youtu.be/QgGIYZtXrhw>

Heart Chakra: I Am Loved by The Wong Janice

That piece of music was composed by The Wong Janice who is a sound meditation guide and cellist based in Amsterdam. The piece is designed to help you release emotional blockages in your heart chakra through the healing and restorative power of sound.

We will now hear Joan read a poem by Thich Nhat Hanh (tick not hon) called *You Are Me*.

Reading/Poem =

You Are Me by Thich Nhat Hanh – Read by Joan via Zoom.

You are me and I am you.

It is obvious that we are inter-are.

You cultivate the flower in
yourself so that I will be beautiful.

I transform the garbage in myself so
that you do not have to suffer.

I support you; you support me.

I am here to bring you peace
you are here to bring me joy.

Many thanks to Joan for her beautiful reading.

Meditation =.

I would like to share part of a meditation taken from Zen teacher Ezra Bayda's book *Being Zen* (Chapter 16: Loving-Kindness Meditation). The meditation in Ezra's book consists of four rounds – the first is orientated towards yourself, the second and third are towards people close to you and the final round is for all beings. This morning I would like to share with you just the first round as it is almost impossible to love others when you do not love yourself.

I invite you to get comfortable and close your eyes if that is open to you. To begin take a few deep breaths to feel grounded. Feel your connection to the earth through your feet or sit bones if you haven't got your feet on the floor.

With each inbreath let your awareness go a bit deeper and whatever you feel, just be aware of that. Your breath may feel warm or cold, open or constricted – try not to dwell, just acknowledge it and bring your focus back to your breath.

On your next inhale bring your awareness to your heart region and on your next exhale silently say to yourself:

May I dwell in the open heart.

Repeat this line a few times on your exhale for the next three rounds of breath. Any sensations or feelings that arise, notice them and return your awareness to the breath.

May I dwell in the open heart.

On your next inhale bring your awareness to your heart region and as you exhale say to yourself:

May I attend to whatever clouds the heart.

Become aware of any feelings that rise to the surface that block access to the open heart – aspects like anger, fear and self-judgement. Extend warmth and love to them and return to your breath. Repeat this sentence with each exhale and continue to send love and warmth to any sensation before returning your attention to your breath.

May I attend to whatever clouds the heart.

Continue breathing into the heart region and on your next exhale say:

May I be awake in this moment, just as it is.

Allow your awareness to include the sounds, smells, thoughts and physical sensations within and around you as you sit. Let life be just as it is for a few breaths. When your attention starts to wander with what you notice then bring your awareness back to your breath without judgement.

May I be awake in this moment, just as it is.

And again - after breathing into your heart-space exhale to yourself:

May the awakened heart be extended to all things.

As you say this specific people or beings may come to mind. As they arrive send love and warmth to them and return your attention to your breath. Repeat this line as you focus your breath in and out of the heart-space.

May the awakened heart be extended to all things.

We will now repeat the whole round. I will read each line and allow some space between them for you to repeat each new line to yourself a few times before moving on. The practice will then end with me reading this round in full followed by three deep breaths.

May I dwell in the open heart.

May I attend to whatever clouds the heart.

May I be awake in this moment, just as it is.

May the awakened heart be extended to all beings.

2nd Hymn = When our heart is in a holy place – Purple (208) words by Joyce Poley

Closing words =

In a moment we will have our blessing, today's closing music and then Sheila will give us the church notices. After a short break to whet our whistle we will then be having a congregational meeting after the service – all are welcome to stay for this whether online or in person.

Just before that though I would like to tell you about a really simple practice which you can take away with you and complete in a matter of seconds to reconnect and open your heart. It is called "Just Like Me". I find it really helps me keep my heart open if I feel myself getting irritated.

As you go about your day later or perhaps next week make an effort to remember wherever you are where there are others – at the doctors, supermarket or work for example - say to yourself this person in front of me, walking beside me or driving behind me wants to be happy, they have sorrows, joys, challenges, wants to love and wants to be loved – just like me.

Blessing =

Divine Spirit -

May you help us recognise true love when we see it and support us as we learn to love ourselves in a compassionate way.

Open our eyes and hearts so we are attentive to others be they friend, family or stranger on life's journey.

Give us patience and kindness so we take the time to understand and appreciate how your divine nature exists in all beings.

May we honour the world by showing gratitude and appreciation for its generous life-sustaining gifts.

Let us go forth in love with unity in our hearts. Let us light the world aflame with love so that wherever there is darkness light shines strongly.

Namaste – the divine light in me recognises the divine light in you.

Chalice Extinguishing

Closing music = <https://youtu.be/OuYLGHkrBk>

All You Need is Love by the Beatles, sung by Rod Stewart, Paul McCartney, Eric Clapton and Joe Cocker. Live on 3/06/2002 @ the Buckingham Palace Gardens.

Can start it at either 25/30 seconds in.