

12th February 2023 – PLYMOUTH

Love as a way of life – led by Rev Kate Whyman

1. INTRO MUSIC A thousand years, Christina Perri (4'47")

<https://youtu.be/rtOvBOTyX00>

2. WELCOME/CHALICE LIGHT

Welcome and good morning to you all, both here in church and joining online today.

We gather, as we do each Sunday, to remember once again who we truly are, to build community together, and to open our hearts and minds to the divine mystery.

Our this month is 'Love' – not surprisingly perhaps as this Tuesday is Valentine's Day. But this service is not about romance on a particular day, it's about love as a way of living our lives.

Let's begin our service, as is our custom, by lighting our chalice as a symbol of our free religious faith. (Do please light one with me if you are able.)

LIGHT CHALICE

We light this flame for the love within each of us, and all beings, and which is expressed in a million ways, both seen and unseen, every moment of every day.

3. PRAYERS

Let us begin today by taking a short silence for the suffering of the world, and in particular for the thousands who have lost their lives, their loved ones, their homes – everything – as a result of the devastating earthquakes in Turkey and Syria. May we hold them in our hearts at this time.

Thank you. We will be holding a collection later.

'Psalm 23 for this moment', Kevin Tarsa

May I remember
in this tender moment
that Love is my guide,
always, shepherding me toward ways of openness and compassion.
I have what I need, really,
with Love at my side, above me, below me, in front of me, behind me,
inside every cell of me,
Love infused everywhere!

Just when the weight of the world I inhabit
threatens to drop me in place
and press my hope down into the ground beneath me
Love invites me to rest for a gentle while,
and leads the centre of my soul to the quiet, still,
restoring waters nearby that,
somehow,
I had not noticed.

And so, Love,
quietly,
sets me once again on its tender and demanding path.

Even when the walls close around me
and the cries of death echo through untold corners,
gripping my heart with fear and sadness,
I know...
that all will be well,
that I will be well,
when Love whispers near to me,
glints at the corner of my eye,
rests with gentle and persistent invitation upon my shoulders.

Yes, Love blesses me,
Even as the sources and symbols of my pain look on.
Love blesses me from its infinite well,
And I turn
and notice...
that goodness and kindness and grace,
follow me everywhere I go.

I live in a house of Love
that will not let me go.
I live in a house of love,
And always will.

4. FIRST HYMN 176 (G) O come together in love

O come together in truth:
O come together in peace;
O come together in joy and sharing,
come together in knowing and caring;
come together,
O come together,
O come together in love.

We come together in search
of new beginnings for all,
where understanding and trust surround us –
gone the hate and fear that bound us;
come together,
O come together,
O come together in love.

Words and music by Dorothy Grover

5. **STORY** 'Try to love a stone', from Richard Rohr 'What the mystics know'

Once upon a time, a small Jewish boy went to his rabbi and said he didn't know how to love God. *"How can I love God when I've never seen him?"* asked the boy. *"I think I understand how to love my mother, my father, my brother, my little sister, and even the people in our neighborhood, but I don't know how I'm supposed to love God."*

The rabbi looked at the little boy and said, *"Start with a stone. Try to love a stone. Try to be present to the most simple and basic thing in reality so you can see its goodness and beauty. Then let that goodness and beauty come into you. Let it speak to you. Start with a stone."* The boy nodded with understanding.

"Then, when you can love a stone," the rabbi continued, *"try a flower. See if you can love a flower. See if you can be present to it and let its beauty come into you. See if you can let its life come into you and you can give yourself to it. You don't have to pluck it, possess it, or destroy it. You can just love it over there in the garden."* The boy nodded again.

"I'm not saying it's wrong to pick flowers," added the rabbi. *"I'm just asking you to learn something from the flower without putting it in a vase."* The boy smiled, which meant he understood – or maybe he didn't.

Just in case he didn't the rabbi chose the boy's pet dog as the next object of loving and listening. The boy nodded and smiled when the rabbi talked about his dog; he even said, *"Yes, Rabbi."*

"Then," the rabbi went on, *"try to love the sky and the mountains, the beauty of all creation. Try to be present to it in its many forms. Let it speak to you and let it come into you."* The boy sensed the rabbi wanted to say some more, so he nodded again, as if he understood.

"Then," the rabbi said, *"try to love another human being. Try to be faithful to them and sacrifice yourself for them. After you have loved a stone, a flower, your little dog, the mountain, the sky, and another person, then you'll be able to love God."*

6. **READING Leslie Jamison, American novelist and essayist**

Empathy isn't just something that happens to us—a meteor shower of synapses firing across the brain—it's also a choice we make: to pay attention, to extend ourselves. It's made of exertion, that dowdier cousin of impulse. Sometimes we care for another because we know we should or because it's asked for, but this doesn't make our caring hollow. The act of choosing simply means we've committed ourselves to a set of behaviours greater than the sum of our individual inclinations. This confession of effort chafes against the notion that empathy should always rise unbidden, that genuine means the same thing as unwilled, that intentionality is the enemy of love. But I believe in intention and I believe in work. I believe in waking up in the middle of the night and packing our bags and leaving our worse selves for our better ones.

7. **SECOND HYMN 9 (G) So simple is the human heart**

A little sun, a little rain,
a soft wind blowing from the west –
and woods and fields are sweet again,
and warmth within the mountain's breast.
So simple is the earth we tread,
so quick with love and life her frame,
ten thousand years have dawned and fled,
and still her magic is the same.

A little love, a little trust,
a soft impulse, a sudden dream,
and life as dry as desert dust
is fresher than a mountain stream.
So simple is the human heart,
so ready for new hope and joy;
ten thousand years have played their part,
but left it young as girl or boy.

Music from Iolo Morgannwg, words from Stopford Augustus Brooke

8. **MEDITATION** – On cultivating loving kindness

The original name of this practice is metta bhavana, which comes from the Pali language. Metta means ‘love’ in a non-romantic sense, so friendliness, or kindness: hence ‘loving-kindness’ for short. It is an emotion, something you feel in your heart. Bhavana means development or cultivation. The commonest form of the practice is in five stages.

1. Start by settling yourself and becoming aware of your body. Allow yourself to feel peace. You may like to use an image, like golden light flooding your body, or a phrase such as ‘may I be well and happy’, which you can repeat to yourself. These are ways of stimulating the feeling of metta for yourself.

2. In the second stage think of a good friend. Bring them to mind as vividly as you can. Think of their good qualities. Feel your connection with your friend, and your liking for them, and encourage these feelings to grow by repeating ‘may they be well; may they be happy’ quietly to yourself. You can also use an image, such as shining light from your heart into theirs.

3. Next think of someone you do not particularly like or dislike. Your feelings are ‘neutral’. This may be someone you do not know well but see around. Reflect on their humanity, and see them bathed in golden light, and include them in your feelings of metta.

4. Then think of someone you actually dislike — an “enemy”, traditionally— but maybe just someone you are having difficulty with. Trying not to get caught up in any feelings of anger or hatred, rather think of them positively and send your metta and shining light to them as well.

5. Finally think of all four people together — yourself, the friend, the neutral person, and the person you dislike. Then extend your feelings further — to everyone around you, to everyone in your neighbourhood; in your town, your country, and so on throughout the world. Have a sense of waves of loving-kindness spreading from your heart to everyone, to all beings everywhere. Then gradually relax out of meditation, and bring yourself back in to the room.

9. SILENCE

10. INTERLUDE: 'The Rose', Bette Midler

<https://youtu.be/aXXqDWsCzuk>

11. ADDRESS

I realize I've always thought of the word 'love' as meaning a more intense version of the word 'like'. To 'love' something, then, is to feel real enthusiasm or passion for it. It's a strong preference. So I might say, I love the sea, I love walking on a sunny, frosty morning, I love chocolate, for example. And when it comes to people, 'love' *also* carries intimacy, caring and loyalty, especially for friends and family. And of course this week the pink hearts reflect the state of falling or being 'in love'.

All these forms of love matter. They are hugely important in our lives. But this morning I wanted to talk about love more as a way of life, by which I mean love that is not limited by preferences, but rather transcends them. About love that 'flows' freely. .

I've have cause to think about flow a lot recently partly. Not in a spiritual way, in a very practical way, because to my dismay sooty rainwater has been gradually making its way down through cracks in my chimney and seeping into my bedroom wall. Marvellous. But then that's water for you – it definitely likes to flow, given even half a chance to do, regardless of any inconvenience it may cause.

Meanwhile, to make my problem worse, air has certainly not been flowing up. The fireplaces upstairs in my house have never been used but the chimneys turned out, on inspection, to be blocked full of about 100 years worth of accumulated masonry dust – plus the odd fossilized bird complete with nest – which meant there was no airflow at all. They have now been swept and cleared and pleasingly (to me) if you light a match in front of the fireplace the flame bends towards the opening, showing air is now rising upwards, which I hope will go some way help counter the damp coming down. Ho hum.

You well may be wondering why I'm telling you about this particular domestic travail and what it's got to do with love.

Well the reason is because water, air, energy, life – they all flow, don't they? Just as long as they're allowed to. Of course they can all be contained – and we do contain them for all sorts of reasons – damming rivers to make reservoirs, for example – but their natural state is to flow. And life will grow pretty much anywhere – it will cling on to rocks, it will squeeze between cracks, it will wait years in the desert for water and then suddenly burst into flower – life will live wherever it can find an opportunity.

And I *think* it's the same with love, as long as we keep the channels open for it, as long as we allow it to flow.

Right now in Turkey and Syria, amongst the death and devastation, there are people risking their lives for other people who they've never met and know absolutely nothing about. They're trying to rescue unknown families from the rubble, they're bringing tea and blankets and medicines to complete strangers, wherever they can, without any preference. This happens in emergencies. The channels open, and love suddenly and miraculously transcends judgment, while likes and dislikes simply fall away. They become irrelevant. Love flows freely.

The question for us is how to keep those channels open more widely and more of the time. How do we metaphorically sweep away the debris and detritus of our fears and doubts, our prejudices and ideologies, that may have built up over a life time, and let love do its work.

I think this is what both the story and the meditation practice are about. They set out ways to open up those pathways that have become blocked. And so by spending time communing with a stone, or a flower, or a pet; by practising loving ourselves and our friends, as well as acquaintances and even enemies, and then allowing that 'metta' or compassion to ripple out further, beyond the boundaries of those we know to those we don't ...these are practices that encourage the channels – ourselves, in other words, to open up and remain open so love can freely flow, not only in disaster

but everyday. To practise more curiosity – which opens us – and less judgment, which closes us down.

This month is LGBT+ History month, which recalls and retells the struggles that so many people have had to go through simply to be accepted and loved for who they are. This week I took part in an anti-racist workshop for ministers in which the Rev Malaika, a black Interfaith Minister, shared experiences from her life of racism towards her and her family that were shocking and heartbreaking.

We can rely on our impulses to love and but they may only take us so far. To love God, as the Rabbi put it, or to make love a way of life, the channels need to open much more widely, and for most of us, who are not saints or mystics, that requires setting an intention and then practising just as we would to develop any skill or to tone any muscle. Just as we might choose to exercise and eat well to keep our blood flowing healthily.

Love is abundant, it is in us all, and will flow through us where it can – our task is surely to let it. May it be so.

12. THIRD HYMN 188 (G) Let love continue long

Let love continue long,
and show to us the way,
and if that love be strong
no hurt can have a say;
and if that love remain but strong,
no hurt can ever have a say.

If love can not be found,
though common faith prevail,
when love does not abound,
a common faith will fail.

When human love does not abound,
a common faith will always fail.

If we in love unite,
debate can cause no strife:
for with this love in sight
disputes enrich our life.
For with this bond of human love,
disputes can mean a richer life.

May love continue long,
and lead us on our way:
for if that love be strong
no hurt can have a say.
For if that love remain but strong
no hurt can ever have a say.

Music John Ireland, from traditional American words

13. **CLOSING WORDS** Matt Licata

It is so easy to take for granted that tomorrow will come, that another opportunity will be given to bear witness to a sunset, take a walk in the forest, listen in awe to the birds, or share a moment of connection with the one in front of us. But another part knows how fragile it truly is here, how tenuous, and the reality that this opening into life will not be here for much longer.

Before we realize it, we can so easily fall into the trance of postponement. The spell of tomorrow looms large in the personal and collective psyche.

At the end of this life – which is sure to come much sooner than we think – it is unlikely we'll be caught up in whether we accomplished all the tasks on our to-do lists, played it safe, healed all the wounds from our past, wrapped up our self-improvement project, or completed some mythical spiritual journey. Inside these hearts there may be only one burning question: how well did I love?

Extinguish chalice

14. **CLOSING VIDEO** 'Give me love'

https://youtu.be/o_gOpk0KhUY