

**Starting Music:** 'Traumerie' Robert Schumann

On Youtube <https://youtu.be/6z82w0l6kwE>

**Welcome:** Good morning and Welcome, whether you are here in the church, joining us online, or watching on youtube at a later date. Welcome whoever you are, and however you are feeling, whatever you carry in your heart, and bring with you: cares, concerns or celebrations, sadness or joys, or plain curiosity! Welcome, whether you have been here many times, and especially, if you are a newcomer – you are all welcome.

However we join in, each one of us is part of our loving community, contributing by being connected in spirit, and all are equally valued. We begin, as is our custom, by lighting our chalice flame as a symbol of our free religious faith. If you are at home and have a candle, you may like to light it with us now.

**Chalice lighting:** Words from 'Act of Horodo', Poland 1413

"Love alone diminishes not but shines with its own light, makes an end to discord, softens the fires of hate, restores the peace of the world, brings together the sundered, redresses wrongs and injures none. Nor can that endure which has not its foundations upon love."

**Introduction of Service theme and opening words**

Today we offer a Congregational Service, on the theme of 'Love', with contributions from church members and friends. Love is a Universal and Eternal emotion, experienced differently by each individual human being, and this is shown in our varied contributions. These are grouped into 3 sections, and range from words from the New Testament, from 1<sup>st</sup> Century Common Era, to a quotation from 15<sup>th</sup> Century Poland, (our opening words) a 17<sup>th</sup> Century English poet, to modern prayers, articles and poems. There is a poem written by Suzanne, one of our congregation, one on 'Love' generated by AI, and an imagined poem from prehistory! put into words by a 21<sup>st</sup> century poet who posts on the internet. Our hymns and music complement our theme of Love.

When our Chairperson Ann suggested 'Love' for today, I reminded her that Gav Howell led a Congregational service on this same topic earlier this year, but we agreed that there can never be too much Love in this world, and so our contributors offer this with love, and hope that each one of you finds something which speaks to you personally.

**Opening words:** By Rev Cliff Reed, based on words by Rabindranath Tagore in 'Sadhana: the realization of Life'

'The Strength to Love'

O giver of thyself! At the vision of you as joy  
Let our souls flame up to you as the fire,  
Flow on to you as the river,  
Pervade your being as the fragrance of a flower.  
Give us strength to love,  
Strength to fully see and hear your universe, fully to live the life that you have given us,  
and to do your work therein.

**1st Hymn: Hymn 110 'Now we sing to praise love's blessing'** (Purple Book)

*Words ©Anna Briggs Music Tune 'Olicana' by David Dawson*

Now we sing to praise love's blessing  
All through our lives,  
Laughter, joy, surprise, confessing  
All through our lives,  
Love that dreamed a new creation,  
Love that dares through incarnation,  
Love that offers transformation  
All through our lives.

How our wounds ache for love's healing  
All through our days;  
How our world needs love's revealing  
In all its ways.  
Fearful hearts suspect the stranger,  
Hardened nations arm for danger,  
Love live on, the powerful changer,  
All through our days.

Love's the grace that makes us caring  
All through our lives,  
Urges us to warmth and sharing  
All through our lives,  
Speaks to us, oppression naming,  
Lives in us, injustice shaming,  
Lives in us, true peace proclaiming  
All through our lives.

Love's the clown that mocks at winning  
All through the world,  
Midwife of each new beginning  
All through the world,  
In the struggles that confound us,  
In the chaos all around us  
Love's wide arms with hope surround us  
All through the world.

In God's faithful love we flourish  
All through our lives,  
Known and loved, each other nourish  
All through our lives;  
Though the world's demands are pressing,  
What life brings is left to guessing,  
Still we sing to praise love's blessing  
All through our lives.

Let us turn to a time of prayer and reflection;

**Prayers: 1.**

Let us pause to hold in our thoughts and prayers all those in our own church community and in the wider world, who are going through sad, difficult or worrying times, whether through illness, or accident due to human actions or natural causes.

At a time when there is unrest and conflict in many countries around the world, we pray especially for all whose lives have been lost or changed forever. May those rushing to escape the violence, many of them vulnerable, young families and the elderly, find sanctuary and peace. May the countries to which they flee somehow find the strength and resources to provide what is needed. We pray that in places where uncertainty follows a change of government, whether by election, deposition of a tyrannical ruler, or censure of another, that a better more peaceful life awaits their populations. May the new leaders be blessed with compassion and the wisdom to prevent further destruction.

We pray for the future health of our home, planet Earth, may we show it more love. May we be moved to offer comfort and solace to one another. May we contribute to and benefit from the resources of love and strength our church community offers, to us and within the wider community outside our doors. ...*AMEN*

**2. A prayer by Rev Dr. Wayne B. Arnason, a retired American UU minister**

"O God, whom we know as Love,

Help us to recognise the love that surrounds us and in which we have our being.

Help us to see ourselves as the loving people we are and can be.

In silence now, we bring to our minds eye the people who have loved us and who continue to love us, Silence ....

People who are not here today, but whose love we carry with us ....*P A U S E*

People who are here every day, whose love we sometimes take for granted .... *P A U S E*

People who *might* be within our circle of love, could we extend it a little further.....

In silence now, we hold these people in our hearts ...Silence ...

In returning from silence, we ask that our hearts may be opened to all whose names and faces have crossed our minds and that the love we share with the people in our lives may be our abiding teacher .... *A M E N*"

1st set of contributions:

We come to our first set of contributions: Looking at what Love means

**Ann's choice:** Corinthians 13 on love read by Sheila

If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging symbol. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast but do not have love, I gain nothing.

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonour others, it is not self seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs.

Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are prophecies, they will cease, where there are. Where there are tongues, they will be stilled, where there is knowledge, it will pass away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when completeness comes, what is in part disappears. When I was a child, I talked like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put the ways of childhood behind me.

For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror;

then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.

And now these three remain; faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.

### ***Lisa's choice*** From 'See, Love, Be' By Tim Stead

The cultivation of genuine love actually starts with the whole business of learning to love ourselves. Jesus famously called us to love our neighbours as we love ourselves (Mark 12.31). This suggests to me that the way we love ourselves should be the model we use for how we love others. So unless we have come to love ourselves, or at least have begun the work of learning to love ourselves, we have nothing to offer others. As Maya Angelou said when she was reflecting on the nature of love, "I don't trust people who don't love themselves and tell me 'I love you'". There is an Africa saying which is: Be careful when a naked person offers you a shirt.

.....for many of us this area is a real problem, either because of our own childhood experience, because of emotional or psychological wounds or the cultural pressures around us, which can be skewed too much towards duty and obedience without enough regard for looking after self and our own needs.

Whatever has caused this, many of us cite our continual struggles with self-judgement, self-criticism and lack of self-esteem, which we are either somewhat defeated by or attempt to counteract with overindulgence or simply by detaching ourselves from such uncomfortable feelings.

.....two words that may help to give colour and tone to the kind of love we are seeking to cultivate, whether to ourselves or others. The first is befriending..... Where hate is busy drawing up a list of who is a friend and who is an enemy, love is trying to work out how to expand the circle of friendship to include everyone and everything. This is just as important when it comes to self-love, as we will find that even within ourselves we have friends and enemies.... Befriending will involve gradually turning those aspects that we treat with caution, suspicion and fear into friends.

The other word is kindness. You could say that this is the means by which we turn enemies into friends – by treating them with kindness. Importantly, we don't need to have started liking someone to treat them with kindness. We can just do it and see what

happens. But kindness will be the mark of our friendship – our offer of friendship – and it stars with ourselves.

### **Christine's Choice: 'Love' by George Herbert**

LOVE bade me welcome; yet my soul drew back,  
    Guilty of dust and sin.  
But quick-eyed Love, observing me grow slack  
    From my first entrance in,  
Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning  
    If I lack'd anything.

'A guest,' I answer'd, 'worthy to be here:'  
    Love said, 'You shall be he.'  
'I, the unkind, ungrateful? Ah, my dear,  
    I cannot look on Thee.'  
Love took my hand and smiling did reply,  
    'Who made the eyes but I?'

'Truth, Lord; but I have marr'd them: let my shame  
    Go where it doth deserve.'  
'And know you not,' says Love, 'Who bore the blame?'  
    'My dear, then I will serve.'  
'You must sit down,' says Love, 'and taste my meat.'  
    So I did sit and eat.

### **Hymn 195 'We sing a love' (Purple Book)**

*Words June Boyce-Tillman B 1943 © Stainer & Bell Ltd., 23 Gruneisen Road, London N3 1DZ used by permission.*

*Tune 'Sursum Corda' Alfred Morton Smith 1879 – 1971*

We sing a love that sets all people free,  
That blows like wind, that burns like scorching flame,  
Enfolds the earth, springs up like water clear.  
Come, living love, live in our hearts today.

We sing a love that seeks another's good,  
That longs to serve and not to count the cost,  
A love that yielding finds itself made new.  
Come, caring love, live in our hearts today.

We sing a love, unflinching, unafraid  
To be itself despite another's wrath,  
A love that stands alone and undismayed.  
Come, strengthening love, live in our hearts today.

We sing a love, that wandering will not rest  
Until it finds its way, its home, its source,  
Through joy and sadness pressing on refreshed.  
Come, pilgrim love, live in our hearts today.

We sing the Holy Spirit, full of love,  
Who seeks out scars of ancient bitterness,  
Brings to our wounds the healing grace of Christ.  
Come, radiant love, live in our hearts today.

2nd set of contributions:

**Marianne's choice: Kahlil Gibran on 'Love'**

Then said Almitra, "Speak to us of Love." And he raised his head and looked upon the people, and there fell a stillness upon them. And with a great voice he said:

"When love beckons to you follow him, though his ways are hard and steep.  
and when his wings enfold you yield to him, though the sword hidden among his pinions  
may wound you. And when he speaks to you believe in him,  
though his voice may shatter your dreams as the north wind lays waste the garden.

For even as love crowns you so shall he crucify you. Even as he is for your growth so is he  
for your pruning.

Even as he ascends to your height and caresses your tenderest branches that quiver in  
the sun,

So shall he descend to your roots and shake them in their clinging to the earth.

Like sheaves of corn he gathers you unto himself.

He threshes you to make you naked.

He sifts you to free you from your husks.

He grinds you to whiteness.

He kneads you until you are pliant;

And then he assigns you to his sacred fire, that you may become sacred bread for God's  
sacred feast.

All these things shall love do unto you that you may know the secrets of your heart, and in  
that knowledge become a fragment of Life's heart.

But if in your fear you would seek only love's peace and love's pleasure,

Then it is better for you that you cover your nakedness and pass out of love's threshing-  
floor,

Into the seasonless world where you shall laugh, but not all of your laughter, and weep,  
but not all of your tears.

Love gives naught but itself and takes naught but from itself.

Love possesses not nor would it be possessed; For love is sufficient unto love. When you  
love you should not say, "God is in my heart," but rather, "I am in the heart of God."

And think not you can direct the course of love, for love, if it finds you worthy, directs your  
course.

Love has no other desire but to fulfil itself.

But if you love and must needs have desires, let these be your desires:

To melt and be like a running brook that sings its melody to the night.

To know the pain of too much tenderness.

To be wounded by your own understanding of love;  
And to bleed willingly and joyfully.  
To wake at dawn with a winged heart and give thanks for another day of loving;  
To rest at the noon hour and meditate love's ecstasy;  
To return home at eventide with gratitude;  
And then to sleep with a prayer for the beloved in your heart and a song of praise upon  
your lips."

**Nick's choice: 'Poem and Message'** by Dannie Abse

Out on the lamented midnight sea  
your sails are blown in jeopardy.  
Gales of grief and terrors force  
you from the spirit's chartered course.

But, in the storm, lighthouses mark  
rocks of dangers in the dark,  
so from this shore of cold I write  
tiny flashes in the Night.

Words of safety, words of love,  
a beacon in the dark to save  
you from the catastrophic sea  
and navigate you home to me.

Dear, vague as a distant star, I,  
in the huge Night's amorphous lie,  
find one small and luminous truth  
of which our usual love was proof.

And I call your name as loud I can  
and give you all the light I am.

**Suzanne on 'Human Love'**

'Human Love'

The variations of human love ,  
has one common denomination,  
truly felt with warmth  
sometimes will mean letting go.  
To want that which another desires  
is to lose something within our selves  
where we found support and understanding.

If that then is the case for you or me  
we should stretch out like a branch on a tree  
continuing life on what we have learned from our human love.  
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**Reflective Silence**

**Reflective Music** 'Romance for Violin & Orchestra' Michael Hoppé

<https://youtu.be/aqM64ziFikI?si=k5dnYZJ7XqvQLo8->

3<sup>d</sup> set of contributions Showing Love, to a place or other living beings, often in practical ways.

### **Kathy's Choice: From 'Fragments of Holiness' December 11<sup>th</sup>**

*By Rita Nakashimi Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker  
Feminist theologians, activists and educators.*

We can come to know the world as paradise when our hearts and souls are reborn through the arduous and tender task of living rightly with one another and the earth.

Generosity, nonviolence, and care for one another are the pathways into transformed awareness.

Knowing that paradise is here and now is a gift that comes to those who practice the ethics of paradise. This way of living is not Utopian. It does not spring simply from the imagination of a better world, but from a profound embrace of this world. It does not begin with knowledge or hope. It begins with love.

### **Steve Finnie's choice: 'I love walking in Plymouth' .**

Steve writes, "I used a poem AI generator to write a Haiku poem using the words: I love walking in Plymouth."

In Plymouth town, I  
Find solace in each footstep  
Love blooms with each stride

The ocean breeze whispers  
Guiding me through quaint streets  
Peace fills my being

Historic charm calls  
Ancient stories fill the air  
Echoes of the past

I stroll by the docks  
Sailboats bobbing in the bay  
Dreams set sail with me

The lighthouse stands tall  
Guiding ships to safe harbor  
A beacon of hope

Seagulls soar above  
Dancing on the ocean's breeze  
Freedom in their wings

I love walking here  
In Plymouth's beauty I find  
Joy in every step

With each passing day  
I fall more in love with this →  
Picturesque seaside town

So I'll keep walking  
In the heart of Plymouth's charm  
Forever at peace



**Delphine's Choice: 'Atlas- There is a kind of love called maintenance'**

By UA Fanthorpe, from 'Safe as Houses' (Peterloo Poets, 1995)

There is a kind of love called maintenance  
Which stores the WD40 and knows when to use it;

Which checks the insurance, and doesn't forget  
The milkman; which remembers to plant bulbs;

Which answers letters; which knows the way  
The money goes; which deals with dentists

And Road Fund Tax and meeting trains,  
And postcards to the lonely; which upholds

The permanently rickety elaborate  
Structures of living, which is Atlas.

And maintenance is the sensible side of love,  
Which knows what time and weather are doing  
To my brickwork; insulates my faulty wiring;  
Laughs at my dryrotten jokes; remembers  
My need for gloss and grouting; which keeps  
My suspect edifice upright in air,  
As Atlas did the sky.

**Delphine's choice: 'My Ox Duke' by John Dyer**

'Twas on a summer noon, in Stainsford mead  
New mown and tedded, while the weary swains,  
Louting beneath an oak, their toils relieved;  
And some with wanton tale the nymphs beguiled,  
And some with song, and some with kisses rude;  
Their scythes hung o'er their heads: when my brown ox,  
Old labourer Duke, in awkward haste I saw  
Run stumbling through the field to reach the shade  
Of an old open barn, whose gloomy floor  
The lash of sounding flails had long forgot.  
In vain his eager haste: sudden old Duke  
Stopped; a soft ridge of snow-white little pigs  
Along the sacred threshold sleeping lay.  
Burnt in the beam, and stung with swarming flies,  
He stood tormented on the shadow's edge:  
What should he do? What sweet forbearance held  
His heavy foot from trampling on the weak,  
To gain his wishes? Hither, hither all,  
Ye vain, ye proud! see, humble heaven attends;  
The fly-teased brute with gentle pity stays,  
And shields the sleeping young. O gracious Lord!  
Aid of the feeble, cheerer of distress,

In his low labyrinth each small reptile's guide!  
 God of unnumbered worlds! Almighty power!  
 Assuage our pride. Be meek, thou child of man:  
 Who gives thee life, gives every worm to live,  
 Thy kindred of the dust.—Long waiting stood  
 The good old labourer, in the burning beam,  
 And breathed upon them, nosed them, touched them soft,  
 With lovely fear to hurt their tender sides;  
 Again soft touched them; gently moved his head  
 From one to one; again, with touches soft,  
 He breathed them o'er, till grunting waked and stared  
 The merry little young, their tails upcurled,  
 And gambolled off with scattered flight. Then sprung  
 The honest ox, rejoiced, into the shade.

**Sheila's choice:** How far back does human love go? Before the age of literacy? Since humans first felt some emotion which we might call 'Love', not having that feeling returned, has been painful - unrequited love hurts, however that is expressed. Brian Bilston, well known for his internet verse, has written what might have been experienced 1.5 million years ago by one of our earliest ancestors, *homo unrequitus*.

**'The Caveman's Lament'** by *homo unrequitus* - modern translation by Brian Bilston

me think about her when sun rises  
 me think about her when sun sets  
 me say to her how much me love her - she tell me love invent not yet  
 me make cave all warm and cosy  
 me lie bearskin on cave floor  
 me play song of love on bone flute - she choose cave of Tim next door ...  
 me no more go out hunt mammoth  
 me throw spear too short or long  
 me sit in cave me paint her picture - she say me got perspective wrong  
 me cook meal to show me love her -  
 diplodocus with fried beans –  
 she say food anachronistic - me not know what this means  
 stone age mighty hard for lovers;, yet rub two flints look what you get - small sparks lead to  
 big inferno - but she say love invent not yet

**3<sup>rd</sup> Hymn Hymn 10 'Love will guide us' (Purple Book)**

Words ©Alan Seaburg. Used by permission. Tune 'Woodland' Thomas Benjamin 1940

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*Words ©Alan Seaburg. Used by permission. Tune 'Woodland' Thomas Benjamin 1940*

Be that guide whom love sustains.  
Rise above the daily strife:  
Lift on high the good you find.  
Help to heal the hurts of life.

Be that helper nothing daunts –  
Do8bt of friend or taunt of foe.  
Ever strive for liberty.  
Show the path that life should go.

Be that builder trusting good,  
Bitter though the test may be:  
Through all the ages they are right,  
Though they build in agony.

Be that teacher faith directs.  
Move beyond the old frontier:  
Though the frightened fear that faith,  
Be tomorrow's pioneer!

**Closing Words: Ann's choice:**

'For Love in a time of conflict '  
*From the book of Blessings, Benedictus by John O' Donahue*

When the gentleness between you hardens  
And you fall out of your belonging to each other,  
May the depths you have reached hold you still.

When no true word can be said , or heard,  
And you mirror each other in the script of hurt,  
When even the silence has become raw and torn,  
May you hear again an echo of your first music.

When the weave of affection starts to unravel  
And anger begins to sear the ground between you,  
Before this weather of grief invites  
The black seed of bitterness to find root,  
May your souls come to kiss.

Now is the time for one of you to be gracious,  
To allow a kindness beyond thought and hurt,

Plymouth Unitarian Church

Congregational Service on 'Love'

15<sup>th</sup> December 2024

Reach out with sure hands

To take the chalice if your love,

And carry it carefully through this echoless waste

Until this winter pilgrimage leads you

Towards the gateway to spring

**Closing video:** ' Love is enough' Bath Philharmonia & Ed Davey 4 mins 5 secs

<https://youtube.com/watch?v=4dnoVc5sv9o&si=oz6QozfPEkdalhk7>