Sunday 18th October

Love: the root of all spiritual paths

Opening music – *River Flows in You* Yiruma (3:36) Yiruma - River Flows In You (Visualizer)

Opening words – Rev. Clifford Reed - **Poppy**

We are here to love -

to love each other,

to love our frail, wounded selves,

to love our broken world,

and to love its suffering people

Let us worship so that love will flow.

Composer/writer of opening music and words shared.

As is our custom – as symbol of our free religious faith, we will now light the chalice: -

Words by Rev. Laura Dobson **(The Light of Love) – Margaret says and Poppy lights the chalice**

We light our chalice candle as a symbol of the light of love.

The light reminds us that love is the greatest power in the world,

the love we share and bless each other with,

here in our beloved community;

the love we take out into the world,

bearing and sharing the light,

wherever we are and whoever we are with,

every day of our lives.

Opening words - Poppy

Good morning and welcome – one and all, whether here in person, joining us live online or catching up another time. It is wonderful to be here – if we are strangers, hello, my name is Poppy and this is Margaret, we are leading you in today's worship.

Those of you here in person will have been given pebbles – those are for later this morning.

The title of today's service is **Love: the root of spiritual paths**. Margaret had asked me if I would like to give a service on love with them whereby, we dedicate time to listen and then reflecting on how we, as Unitarians and other specific spiritual traditions view love and how that may inspire our values and actions.

Opening words - Margaret

Our church has a guided motto.

Rooted in love, gained by reason and united in community. All are welcome here, whatever your faith or if you have none.

So today we are going to see what love means to some other faiths.

But first, let us sing our first hymn…

Hymn no. 1 - **Purple 128 Our World is One World**

Margaret – thanks everyone and introduces Ann who will read our story -

Story – The Story of the Great Blanket (author unknown)

Once upon a time, in a valley not too far from here, there lived a weaver named Rowan. Rowan didn't weave ordinary blankets out of wool. Rowan wove blankets out of Love.

Whenever someone in the village was feeling lonely, or cold, or sad, Rowan would sit at the great wooden loom and weave a blanket to wrap around their shoulders. And every time Rowan made a blanket, they used a different kind of thread.

One day, a young girl named Maya came to the workshop. She looked very confused.

"Rowan," Maya asked, "what does love actually look like? Everyone keeps talking about it, but I don't think I've ever seen it."

Rowan smiled and walked over to a large wooden chest. "Well, Maya, love doesn't look like just one thing. It has many different threads. Let me show you."

Rowan opened the chest and pulled out a spool of bright, golden thread.

"This," Rowan said, "is a thread from the Buddhists. They call it *Metta*. It is a very special thread because it stretches forever. When you hold this thread, you don't just wish happiness for your friends; you wish it for people you don't know, people far away, and even for the little spiders in the corner of the room. It is love for *every single living thing*."

Next, Rowan pulled out a deep green thread that smelled like fresh rain and moss.

"This is a thread from the Pagans and Druids," Rowan explained. "They look at the giant oak trees, the flowing rivers, and the birds in the sky, and they feel a deep, magical love for the Earth. This thread reminds us that we are part of nature, and when we take care of the trees and the soil, we are practicing love."

Then, Rowan reached in and pulled out a strong, sturdy silver thread.

"This is the Humanist thread," Rowan said. "Humanists know that we don't need magic or sky-gods to make the world a better place. We just need each other. This thread is made of kindness, reason, and fairness. It's the love you use when you help a friend who has fallen over, or when you stand up against a bully."

Finally, Rowan pulled out a warm, bright orange thread.

"And this," Rowan smiled, "is a thread from the Sikhs. They call it *Seva*. This isn't a thread for sitting still. This is an active thread! It's the love used when you cook a big meal to feed anyone who is hungry, making sure nobody ever has to sit alone or go without."

Maya looked at all the different spools—the gold, the green, the silver, and the orange.

"But Rowan," Maya said, "which thread is the *right* one to make a blanket?"

Rowan laughed softly, took a piece of each thread, and began to tie them together. Then, Rowan sat at the loom and began to weave. Clack-clack, clack-clack went the loom. The gold blended with the green, the silver wrapped around the orange, until they became one beautiful, multi-coloured fabric.

Rowan took the finished blanket and gently wrapped it around Maya's shoulders. It was warm, soft, and completely safe.

"You see, Maya," Rowan said, "we don't just need one thread. Here in our chapel, we use *all* of them. Because when we weave everyone's

love together, we make a blanket big enough to warm the whole world."

Poppy – thanks to Ann – a beautiful story. We will now sing our second hymn…

Hymn 2 - Purple 195 – We Sing a Song of Love

Love across spiritual paths – Poppy

Thanks - it has been said that if you dig deep enough into the soil of any genuine spiritual tradition, you will eventually find your hands wet with the same water.

We would like to now share with you information and quotes to illustrate love across different spiritual paths:

Margaret

In Judaism, one of the core commandments is to love your neighbour as stated in Leviticus 19:18, “Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against anyone among your people, but love your neighbour as yourself.”

This is shown by feeding the hungry, helping the poor, and doing good deeds. Judaism is love in action, which springs from a right heart.

What does love mean in the Sufi tradition? It is a path of self-discovery. Love is the key to everything. It can transform our souls and connect us to the divine. Through love we experience unity with all existence.

Love is shown by striving to embody the divine attributes of mercy, compassion and forgiveness.

This poem by Rumi is from the book "Rumi's Little Book of Life" (pg 70) and expresses their views on love:

"If you are unaware of the infinite hues of Love

In the eyes of God you are no more than a stone.

Only Love can squeeze water out of stone,

only Love can clear the rust from the mirror of the heart.

When Love in all is majesty opens its mouth

Like a whale it devours everything

It bewilders the mind and overwhelms the soul.

Love is the lion of Truth.

Distrust causes war, trust restores peace

But Love sets fire to both!

Only on the wings of Love can the heart fly

To where the beloved dwells."

I am now going to highlight the core teachings of love in the Baha'i faith. Firstly, by sharing a quote from Abdu'l-Baha, head of the Bahá'í Faith from 1892 until 1921 from their book *Divine Philosophy* (pg 45): -

"That which will leaven the human world is a love that will insure the abandonment of pride, oppression and hatred."

Followers of this path see all people as reflections of God. They believe in living kindness every day, through actions not just words.

They view love as a link between creator and creation and that all major religions came from the same divine source.

To love we need to eliminate all forms of prejudice involving race, class and gender.

The Baha'i use both the tools of science and religion to understand reality.

Now we come to what love means in Hinduism. Sri Ramakrisna Paramahamsa, the 19th century Hindu spiritual leader, is quoted as saying "Have love for everyone, no one is other than you".

In Hinduism, love is a vast spectrum and a fundamental part of the divine nature. From physical desire to cosmic devotion, a path to spiritual liberation.

Some of the key aspects are:

Kama – which is physical attraction and sensory desire. It is not shameful but natural and a joyful part of human life.

Shringara – is a romantic intimacy which is shared affection, poetry and emotional bonding.

Maitric – which is universal friendliness, care and compassion towards all living beings.

Bhaktic – which is intense, selfless and devotional love, directed toward the divine or chosen deity.

Atma Prema – is unconditional self-love and the realisation of the divine spark within oneself.

I will now discuss Christian love. St. Thomas Aquinas said that "To love is to will the good of another."

To Christians, love is unconditional; it is self-sacrificing and seeks the well-being of others rather than it just being a feeling.

It is demonstrated through active patience, kindness, humility and ultimately in the laying down one's life for others.

Some aspects are:

1) It is action over emotion
2) Self-less and humble
3) Partnered with truth

The Bible refers to 4 different types of love:

Agape – unconditional love

Phila – friendship love

Storge – familial love

Eros – romantic love

What I noticed whilst researching these faiths is that love, compassion and forgiveness for others is common and practiced in each and is accompanied by active love – caring and helping ones in need.

Poppy – Thanks Margaret **-** I will now share more spiritual paths noted views on love through quotes.

Chief Seattle of the Duwamish and Suquamish tribes is purported to have said to the US government in 1854 “"We are part of the earth, and the earth is part of us... All things are connected like the blood which unites one family".

The traditional Wiccan Rede states “An' ye harm none, do what ye will...Live and let live, fairly take and fairly give.”

In the Buddhist texts we learn of Metta, lovingkindness and compassion as The Dhammapada, Verse 130 says, “[e]veryone trembles at violence; life is dear to all. Putting oneself in the place of another, one should not kill nor cause another to kill”.

Similarly, Confucianism highlights benevolence: “To practice virtual is to love people. When you love people, you seek their wellbeing” - Book 12, Chapter 22 of *The Analects*.

In the Tao Te Ching, Lao Tzu shares the true nature of the Dao (the Way) in Chapter 67 - “I have three treasures which I hold and keep: The first is compassion; the second is frugality; the third of humility.”

Shinto promotes Makoto – living with a pure, sincere heart, in harmony with the Kami, the divine forces, present in every leaf, rock, and gust of wind.

Here in our Unitarian tradition, we do not ask you sign up to a creed. We do not hand you a ready-made map of the divine. Instead, we offer the freedom to look at the vast landscape of human wisdom, to listen to your own reason and conscience, and to discern where the truth resides.

But freedom is not an end in itself. If we are free, we must ask: *free for what?*

The answer, I believe, lies in the voices we have just heard from across time, geography, and culture. When we strip away the local languages, the specific historical contexts, and the institutional structures of the world's great philosophies, we find a remarkably consistent heartbeat. At the root of them all is an invitation to step out of the isolation of the ego and into the expansive reality of love.

Look at how this manifests across the paths we have honoured today.

Earth-based traditions and Pagan paths highlight the belief of interbeing, recognising we are not separate from nature but exist through a mutual exchange. The earth sustains our life with air, water

and food, through gratitude and respectful stewardship of the planet and those we share it with, completes the circle. Genuine love is non-possessive and liberating – it encourages nature and beings alike to grow into their true authenticity.

The ancient insights of Shinto, love is not a sentimental human emotion; it is a structural reality. It is *reverence*. It is the deep, reciprocal relationship between us and the living world—the recognition that the rock, the river, the tree, and the person sitting next to you are all animated by the same sacred spark. To love, in this sense, is to live in harmony with the whole.

In Daoism, we find this love expressed as *Wu Wei*—the gentle, unforced flow of life, a compassion that does not force its own way but heals by simply being present, like water softening stone. And Confucianism grounds this flow into our immediate human reality through *Ren*—benevolent care, showing us, that love is an ethical duty, a practical responsibility to our families, our neighbours, and our society.

When we turn to Buddhism, love expands into *Metta*—a boundless, intentional loving-kindness. It challenges us to look even at those who trouble us, or those we do not know, and wish for their freedom from suffering. It is a love that actively dissolves boundaries.

And in Sikhism, we hear the ecstatic truth that love is the ultimate bridge to the Divine. *"He who loves all, finds God."* Here, love is a fierce, devotion-filled fire that burns away our illusions of separateness.

As Unitarians in the UK, our history is rooted in a radical, open-minded pursuit of truth. We are the inheritors of a tradition that looked at doctrines and creeds and said, "No, truth is wider than this." When I look at individual spiritual paths, I do not see competing claims or ideas. I see mirrors reflecting different angles of the same great mystery.

I see love as the universal root, the force that pulls us into community, and therefore the reason we gather in this room today.

We do not have to believe the same things to love the same things. We do not need a uniform theology to share a unified commitment to compassion, justice, and peace. May you find strength and comfort in what we have shared today – the news and challenges impacting us currently, whether as individuals, a wider community, country, or planet lies heavy at times – sometimes love seems to be wholly absent in people's actions and views – but be assured, many people hold love at the centre of what they chose to do, there are those out there dedicating what they can to others and shining truth and kindness in the darkness. Small acts do matter; you matter and make a difference.

Poppy – let us now be led in a moment or prayer – I invite Stephen up to lead us…

Prayer – Rev. Tony McNeile – **read by Stephen**

Let us open our hearts to prayer.
Love is the doctrine of this church.
Love that transcends.
Love that forgives.
Love that nourishes.
Love that heals.
Love that reaches out to help.
Love that makes friendships strong.
Let us be thankful for love in our lives.
We may find love in people or places, or pets or find love alone in the beauty of solitude.

Let our hearts also reach out to those places and those people where there is little love or no love.
Places where love has been denied.
Places where love is a weapon and not a gift.

Let our prayer of love reach into those sad places with hope and strength.

Let our prayer of love reach out to one another today, a welcome, supporting love, that tells me we a community who care for one another, support one another in sickness and health, in joy, and in sorrow.

Let us think of God's love as a warm light that lives within us, that can shine from us. May that love lift us when we feel down and be praised when we are happy.

Reflection – Poppy leads, The Stones of Intention before music

Nuvole Bianche Ludivico Einaudi (3:08) Ludovico Einaudi - Nuvole Bianche

Thanks Stephen – as I mentioned back at the start of today's service – those of you here in person have a pebble. Now, stones have symbolised strength, balance and memory throughout history. This morning now, I invite you to take that stone into your hands. Feel its weight, its smooth edges, and cool surface. Whilst those here in person do that, if you don't have a pebble, you are watching later or joining us digitally this morning – you can do this later when able or for now, you can imagine you are walking a beach or a woodland and collect a pebble. Once you have it, see yourself holding it.

Now – everyone, once I have finished explaining, you are invited to let this pebble hold an intention for you. For example, you may be carrying a worry, let the pebble take on that, or you want to offer up a prayer for someone or make a commitment for the coming days- let the pebble take on that intention. You may wish your intention to be inspired by today's worship – on love, for yourself, someone else, a group etc. Whatever calls to you.

We will enter a quiet time of reflection, firstly with a period of silence and then a piece of music will play for three minutes. At any time during the reflection, if you would like, you can come forward and place your pebble into the water – the pebbles together reminding us that we do not journey alone, that you are part of a wider community. Those online or joining us later, please visualise doing this – or you may wish to physically carry out the ritual when able.

Thank you for your participation.

Margaret – introduces the next hymn…

Hymn 3 – Purple 147 – Spirit of earth, root, stone and tree

Closing words – Margaret

In the book *The Elements of Unitarianism* by George Chryssides, on page 45 it says that some Unitarians, instead of a creed, would produce affirmations. I would like to share one with you now:

“Love is the doctrine of this church

The quest for truth is its sacrament

And service is its prayer

To dwell together in peace

To seek knowledge in freedom

To serve human need

To the end that all souls grow in harmony with the divine

Thus, do we covenant with each other and with God.”

Closing music – Poppy introducing – the words are sung in the South African language of Xhosa (click -OH sah) and are adapted from Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's poem *Keramos* which includes the themes of unity, interconnectedness and renewal through the turning of the wheel. Themes of which speak to love to me.

Iza Ngomso Christopher Tin (4:06) Christopher Tin - Iza Ngomso "Come Tomorrow" (Visualizer)

May we all leave this place today with our minds open to the wisdom of the world, our feet firmly planted on this sacred Earth, and our hearts anchored in the one, universal root of love.