

And the Greatest of These is Love

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The beeps and buzzes on the intensive care unit create a chorus of chaos. Nurses, technicians, and providers glide in and out of rooms as if they were on skates. And there are enough machines, tubes, medicines and IV poles for a small army.

When walking on the unit, I do not immediately get warm fuzzies and think “Ah, what a lovely place.” This, in fact, does not seem a likely place for Love at all. Yet Love is what I found there, and what I continue to find in my day to day work as a chaplain.

I walked into a room once and there Love was (she has many disguises). In this instance, Love was in her 60s fighting terrible COPD and decades of mental illness. She was quick witted and impulsive (we have all known impulsive loves, right?). She is kind and welcoming. This Love just wanted to be seen and heard and cared for, known by those around her.

When I worked on a cardiac unit, Love was a young woman with a rare disease and a strong faith very different from my own. She was bright and everyone enjoyed being around her. Love made difficult decisions about not receiving certain treatments. She actually had no fear of dying, despite being a young mother. Love accepted what was. And in this instance, she lived and went home (with a lot of medical assistance).

In another instance, I found Love in a nursing home (Love is always hiding in the unlikeliest of places). This Love has been around for almost a century and may be around for another one the way she lives. She taught me new card games and new ways of looking at how to measure what matters in life. And everytime I see her, she always reminds me that I am important to her.

But Love is not always sweet on the surface. I've found tiny Love in labor and delivery, born too soon. I found wounded Love in the emergency department, with bullet holes. Love is also on the oncology unit receiving radiation. And Love is, of course, undergoing treatment for depression.

Time and again, from patients, families, friends, and yes even from wonderful UUs like you, I get asked the following questions, “Isn’t your job depressing?” or “Isn’t doing that hard?” or “Why would you want to do that?” To say that this work (and my calling to it) is misunderstood would be an understatement.

And my answer doesn’t often fit into a neat 30 second elevator speech. But sometimes, in my answer, I tell people about Love-- and all the other words that are used to describe it. Yes, Love has as many names as faces. I tell people how moved I am to be in Love’s presence whether in a hospital room or hallway, a visit or a meeting, during lunch or even after hours in the parking lot. I am pretty sure Love works overtime.

I do this work, and am called to this work, because of the Love I witness on a regular basis in the hospital.

At this point, some of you might be thinking that I am painting a pretty nice picture of the hospital. Let me be clear. I in *no way* want to suggest that the hospital is a desirable or romantic place to be. It is not. Many of us who have been on the patient (and family) end of the spectrum can confirm this.

It can be a place of heartbreak, despair, sadness, grief, pain, and suffering. It is a place of chaos, full of talking, fact finding, and making plans for a future that isn't here yet and may never come.

But those are the things that are easy to see. Those are the things we expect to see.

Those are also the things we more easily find outside the hospital in our day to day lives as well. Watching TV or checking the news, we can easily become inundated and overwhelmed the bad news. The opioid crisis. Climate change. Homelessness. Systemic racism. (Not to mention another election season)

Or maybe it's the small screen of our cell phones calling us to compare ourselves to strangers on the internet. Pay attention to a new diet. Royals and their babies. The friend who posts too much on facebook.

It could be our tv meteorologist telling us of a frightening future forecast. It might be our computers asking us to read and answer emails with haste. Yes, it could even be our favorite friend, google, prompting us to grasp at knowledge with more and more frequency.

According to one of my favorite movies, Jerry Maguire, "We live in a cynical, cynical world, and work in a business of tough competitors," (and that was before the internet). This can feel true for us whether we work in a hospital, at a school, our own business, a restaurant, or elsewhere.

Whenever and however we get pulled from the present moment, when we miss witnessing Love. We easily forget its power and greatness in our ordinary lives.

Lucky for us though, we are not the first people who have struggled with this conflict of how to be present to Love in the midst of turmoil. The people of Corinth (ancient Greece), whom Paul (a very complicated and complex Christian convert) struggled with this as much as we did. He even wrote a strongly worded letter about Love.

Our reading today reflects that struggle. These words, which many of us hear at weddings this time of year, are not just words for those getting married. They are words for us all. They are just not words for the marriage altar. They are words for all the altars we encounter in the world. So I want to engage with them in this new light.

Paul was trying to tell the people of Corinth, that Love (with a capital L) is greater than the things which pull us from the present moment: greater than tongues, greater than prophecy, greater than knowledge, greater than faith.

“If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels,” he writes, “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.”

Let’s start with the word tongues. It can throw me off a bit. We’re not talking about people actually speaking in tongues. In this passage it just means speech. Apparently the Corinthians were quite chatty. We have that in common. And their tendency to talk too much actually got in the way of building their community.

In looking at this passage with modern eyes, I can think of times and instances in my personal life and in my work as a chaplain where I’ve focused on trying to explain something or trying to say exactly the right words (or preach the right sermon). I wonder if any of you have had that experience as well...

But nothing is a substitute for real presence. I think this passage holds wisdom for us today in discovering that sometimes we have to be quiet, with our mouths and our minds, in order to really be present and discover Love.

Now what about prophetic powers? This one certainly doesn't sound like it's for our time. But really a prophecy is just a prediction or forecast of some kind (like those meteorologists we were talking about). Prophecy, in our day and age, just means planning and thinking ahead.

Now I don't know about you but I am terribly guilty of putting planning on a pedestal. I am the type of person who would gladly organize my whole life in file folders with nice little multi-colored paper clips, if I could.

Plans are necessary, of course, but the warning from Corinth is-- when we begin to put future plans over our current Love, we lose the ability to be present. And everyday Love is almost impossible to notice and recognize when we are not present.

Onto knowledge, now-- something many of us here (and certainly many in the world of healthcare) hold quite dear (myself included). Sure, Love is the shared theology we build upon here, but our tradition also promises to seek knowledge in freedom. This is something that has always been important to our movement.

There was a time in our history, meaning the larger history of Christian tradition from which we came, where knowledge was only for a select few. Knowledge was mediated in church; it was not for everyone. In response, many of our forebears sought knowledge. We held tight to knowledge. And maybe today we still try to **know** our way around things that cannot be grasped by knowledge, like Love.

This passage says we can know in part, but that knowledge will come to an end. Love, however, never ends. This seems like the most straightforward part of Paul's message. Knowledge is fleeting, while Love is everlasting.

This can make any of us feel a little uncomfortable. Just like planning things, knowing things can make us feel good. It can give us a little certainty and control, something to hold onto, something to prove, something to rest on.

But as a chaplain, knowing more has never helped me be more present to Love. I've sometimes gotten caught myself, and thought-- Maybe if I knew more about his faith, or maybe if I knew what her diagnosis really meant, I might be able to better sit with them.

Those thoughts go through my head, but in practice, I enter someone's room usually knowing very little. And that is often when Love invites me in. And that's when, in my better moments, I am able to open my heart to witness this Love and all its attributes.

And lastly Paul writes about faith, another warning for Corinth and us. Surely this part of the passage was an error? After all, wasn't Paul trying to teach these folks in Corinth how to do church? That seems far fetched without emphasizing faith.

But as part of your church's mission here states, you seek to "Respect diverse points of view as (you) create a peaceful, loving, and just community while serving your congregation and the world beyond." You are grounded in creating more love here and everywhere you go, to those you know and care for and to those with whom you might disagree. This is a bold calling.

Holding Love at the center calls us back to our Universalist heritage. The largeness of the love we carry has to be greater than any one people, culture, political group or faith. Those groups have the habit of putting us in silos, especially our faith.

The early Universalists noticed that and they argued for a radically inclusive God of Love, and the idea of universal salvation--that all people, no matter what their earthly sins, would be reconciled to that God, to that Love, and no one would suffer in torment forever. Our ancestors said that Love is greater than faith and belief and that everyone will share in the destiny of Love (Maybe even Paul was a secret Universalist).

So the good news is plentiful this morning. Love is already in our history and in your congregational DNA. Love is greater than talking, planning, knowing, or even believing.

The good news is that Love is present in our midst if we are able to show up and witness it, not on a Wedding day, but just in the everyday. We know what it looks like, no matter what costume it is wearing-- a hospital gown, a white coat, scrubs, sweats, or a suit.

Love asks us, again and again, to simply be present in our here and now experiences, so we can recognize Love in ourselves, in one another, and in the world. Even, and especially, when we find the world to be a frightening place.

It is times like these that call us to remember that:

“Love **is** patient; love **is** kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does **not** insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.”

May it be so. Amen.