

## Centered in Love

By Rev. Jane Bennett Smith, Channing Memorial Church, UU, Ellicott City, MD February 5, 2023

Midway through each month I sit down with a cup of coffee, find my center, and contemplate on the worship theme for the month ahead. A few weeks ago, I sat before my office window, connecting with nature in the best way I could, and reflected on February's theme: love. I asked myself, what is love? A succinct definition evaded me, and in its place came a rushing flow of memories.

I thought of love felt most poignantly in loss. I remember sitting by my stepfather's death bed, whispering my goodbyes into his ear. Or centering in prayer, lighting a candle, and telling my aunt who had left this realm how much I missed her. Or listening to music from decades ago, reminiscing on a childhood friend who died of cancer, offering the lyrics as a gift to the beyond.

I reflected on the love I feel every time I am in nature, connected to the beauty around me as well as to my sacred. I thought of looking into my beloved husband's eyes the first time we said, "I love you." I remembered the love I felt when heading to Standing Rock in a van full of clergy in solidarity with the water protectors in North Dakota. Or the love I felt for complete strangers as I stood beside the suffering as a hospital chaplain, using faith and a listening ear and compassion as a catalyst towards healing. I thought, too, of the love felt and pain relinquished whenever I offered the words, "I forgive you." Or the love that served as a catalyst for justice as I took to the streets, chanting George Floyd's name or joining en masse in response to the "me too" movement

Is there a theme to this flood of memories? Definitely vulnerability. Definitely a connection to who I am at my core; a commitment to being true to myself – exactly what we focused on last month. In finding our center we find what is most true to us, and what is most true to us is

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what we love. These stories amplify compassion, and an acknowledgment of everyone's inherent worth. What do these stories lack? I think, fear, which, in many ways, is the opposite of love. Fear keeps us firmly incapable of vulnerability. Fear keeps us isolated – it holds us in solitude. Fear holds us firmly behind the bars of anger, distrust, judgment, critique. It keeps us from love.

In continuing on my search for a satisfactory definition of love, I came across the writings of Theologian, philosopher, and scholar Thomas Jay Oord. Oord writes, "To love is to act intentionally, in sympathetic response to others (including God), to promote overall well-being."<sup>1</sup> Let's pause and break this down into bite-sized pieces.

So, intention. Love is a choice. Love requires us to be deliberate in our actions, for our motives to be pure and healing and good. Love – or hate, or fear – emerges in the decisions we make. Oord writes, "love is meaningless if individuals are not free to choose one action rather than others."<sup>2</sup> I chose to go to Standing Rock. I chose to rush to my stepfather's bedside. I chose to pray to my sacred. I chose to forgive. Any of these are in stark contrast to the opposing choices: indifference, isolation, resentment.

Let us explore Oord's second phrase: love is "In sympathetic response to others (including God)."<sup>3</sup> Oord elaborates, "Love requires actual relations with others... no one expresses love in a vacuum."<sup>4</sup> In love, or in fear, or in hate, we influence one another. The lover and the one being loved are in a mutual relationship. Each one of the memories that flooded my mind was intricately interwoven with the one being loved, whether my husband or my deceased aunt or the Water Protectors. Even with my sacred – my God. When centered in love, even in death, and especially in justice, and quite often in romance, and – in some theologies - with the

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<sup>1</sup> *Defining Love: A Philosophical, Scientific, and Theological Engagement* by Thomas Jay Oord pg. 15

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid* pg. 17

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid* pg. 15

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid* pg. 19

sacred, we affect one another in profound, intimate, beautiful ways. Love is reciprocal. Together, in relationship, we foster safety, joy, healing, calm, and peace

And, the third phrase in Oord's definition: love works "To promote overall well-being."<sup>5</sup> Love takes into account the individual and ripples outward, encompassing the global community. Love affects humans, yes, and nature and even God. Choosing loving actions that promote the wellbeing of all pertains to any form of life.<sup>6</sup> I think of our own commitment as a people of faith to the interdependent web of life – to choose love is to choose the security and prosperity of all. As a chaplain I centered on the wellbeing of those who were suffering – from loss, from illness, from trauma. In joining together in the streets, I centered on the wellbeing of the marginalized and the oppressed. In the gaze of my husband's eyes, I centered on the wellbeing of the one I love above all else. Love.

These reflections offer one definition of love. What do you think?

Oord further discusses what he terms "unlimited love" – the "the ultimate reality that underlies all that is."<sup>7</sup> Love touches all that is. I note that in recalling my memories of love, I reflected on somewhat easy love, the love of my beloveds. What about that ripple of unlimited love that reaches each being in our web of life? Those we disagree with, those we consider enemies, those whose essence seems to be grounded in hate and fear. I am reminded of the sentiments of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., whose unfaltering commitment to love fostered a nonviolent revolution countering our country's history of profound racism – the racism held by those who could easily be considered enemies. Hardened hearts were changed when met with unlimited, unconditional love. This is what King termed redemptive love – that which has the power to heal and the capacity to liberate.

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<sup>5</sup> *Defining Love: A Philosophical, Scientific, and Theological Engagement* by Thomas Jay Oord pg. 15

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid* pg. 24

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid* pg. 4

What about the political divisiveness creating deep schisms in our country today? To me, that calls for a love that relinquishes assumptions, judgments and criticism and instead focuses on compassion and understanding and a commitment to learning more about one another – to hearing one another’s stories. Where does love fit in as we experience the horror of the violent, tragic death of Tyre Nichols? Love means holding the perpetrators accountable while praying that their hearts will be changed. Love means creating a just, peaceful, equitable life for each soul on this realm and each soul yet to come by creating a society where violence is not the status quo. Love means holding in sacred embrace all of those who are grieving and suffering from this unnecessary loss of life. Love means saying Tyre Nichols’ name and making sure he is never forgotten.

I end this reflection with a final quote from Oord, “A common way to speak of the concern to promote overall well-being, not just the well-being of one or a few, is to speak of love as including justice.”<sup>8</sup> Love is a catalyst and a sustainer of justice.

I pose another question, now that we have a basic definition: what do we need in order to love? I think of a powerful lesson I learned as a young adult - the power and necessity of forgiveness. A relinquishment of pain, not a “get out of jail free” card. That’s love, too. Love requires an ability to forgive – otherwise we remain filled with grievances that hold us in bondage. Or the sentiments of Mother Teresa, who elaborated “If you judge people, you have no time to love them.”<sup>9</sup> What comes to mind when we pass an addict on the street corner, or see a political flag rippling proudly in the wind? Let us release judgment. I wonder, too, of the need for a connection to something greater than ourselves. 12-step groups emphasize a relatedness to a higher power to relieve oneself of suffering. I, personally, felt a greater connection to love and peace and meaning once I began to pray to my own God. Does the goddess hold you in her womb, does nature remind you of the preciousness of each living thing? I think, too, of the unique elements of romantic, sensual love. Author Heidi Priebe

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<sup>8</sup> *Defining Love: A Philosophical, Scientific, and Theological Engagement* by Thomas Jay Oord pg. 60

<sup>9</sup> *From Soul Matters Worship Series* February 2023

writes, “To love someone long-term is to attend a thousand funerals of the people they used to be.”<sup>10</sup> We are called to be on a journey together that traverses tragedy just as it navigates joy. When grief turns a carefree beloved into one steeped in pain into one of intense wisdom, we are there. When hurt becomes anger becomes compassion, we are there. Heartbreak, too, becomes necessary for love. How much more profound is our love if we juxtapose it to pain? Heartbreak is the risk we take in any relationship. 13th-century Persian poet Rumi wrote, “Your task is not to seek for Love, but merely to seek and find all the barriers within yourself that you have built against it.”<sup>11</sup> I saw these barriers when working as a chaplain with teenagers struggling to simply get through life. Many had faced difficult childhoods with pain I can only imagine, and to protect themselves they constructed around them nearly impenetrable barricades – barricades that simultaneously prevented love. To see them working to chip away at these fortifications one small group, one kindled friendship at a time, was beautiful.

I think, too, of the Principles of our faith. To love is to acknowledge and celebrate the inherent worth and dignity of every person. Acknowledging this worth makes justice unavoidable. We are called to be with the impoverished, the unhoused, the addicts, the teenage mothers, the sex workers. We are called to release judgment, as Mother Teresa instructed us,<sup>12</sup> and instead to ask questions and hear stories. We are called to love and help foster lives of peace and of meaning for all. To love is to acknowledge and celebrate the interdependent web of life – what affects one affects us all. To harm an enemy is to harm the one we hold most dear. The oppression of one is the oppression of all. Likewise, to hold dear a beloved is to cherish the stranger; to liberate one is to set us all free.

And yet, in my contemplation on love, two attributes stood out as the most essential prerequisites to loving another: vulnerability, and self-love. I think of the vulnerability held deep within each of the personal vignettes I shared earlier. I felt my grief so deeply and profoundly because of how fully I loved my stepfather, aunt, and friend when they were alive –

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<sup>10</sup> From blog *In the Margins*

<sup>11</sup> From *Soul Matters Worship Series* February 2023

<sup>12</sup> *ibid*

love that ultimately led to deep pain. Or the vulnerability it took to open my heart and soul to an unknowable sacred, or the vulnerability in opening myself fully to loving my husband, or in acting alongside the water protectors, or in giving my all to help heal strangers in that hospital whose grief and pain was bursting at the seams. Love requires vulnerability. Love requires opening oneself to some of the deepest pain humanity will ever face. And, love is opening us up to some of the greatest and most precious joys we could imagine.

I want to end with a reflection on self-love. Quaker author and activist Parker Palmer writes that self-love is “never a selfish act – it is simply good stewardship of the only gift I have, the gift I was put on earth to offer others.”<sup>13</sup> Palmer calls us to reframe our own image of ourselves – to see ourselves as good and whole and worthy. He echoes my own sentiment: self-love comes before all other forms of love. If we focus on the faults of ourselves, we also focus on the faults of others. If we dislike or judge ourselves, we are going to dislike or judge others. This is painful. We can only offer what we know; we can only share what we have. And all of what we know, all what we have – this is a gift. I think of those things held tender by so many: Our perfectly imperfect bodies; the barricades we erected to protect ourselves, just as those youth did; all the insecurities we harbor within – let us love this. Is that not opening ourselves to compassionate, scary, and life-giving vulnerability? Our imperfections and insecurities – our accomplishments and strengths and points of pride – all of this is a gift to the world. Let us tend to this – to this gift. Let us love.

So, what is love? First, I must ask you, what are your stories? What do you hold in your center? Who was your first love – your first romantic partner? Who do you still mourn deep in your heart? Who are you called to forgive? Who are you called to help heal? What do you hold, in this realm or another, as most sacred? Center in this – center in love – love yourself and help heal an aching world.

May it be so, and Amen.

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<sup>13</sup> *Let Your Life Speak: Listening to the Voice of Vocation* by Parker Palmer

