

Is Love All You Need?
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Readings

from Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians:

If I speak in human and angel tongues, but have not 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 have not love, I am nothing. If I give away all I have, and if I deliver my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing.

Love is patient and kind; love is not jealous or boastful; it is not arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrong, but rejoices in the right. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends; as for prophecies, they will pass away; and as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away. For our knowledge is imperfect and our prophecy is imperfect; but when the perfect comes the imperfect will pass away. So faith, hope, love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.

from the writings of Chinese philosopher Mo-Tse (463-401 B.C.E.):

When all the people of the world love,
Then the strong will not overpower the weak.
The many will not oppress the few.
The wealthy will not mock the poor.
The honored will not disdain the humble.
The cunning will not deceive the simple.

from the letters of 20th century poet Rainer Maria Rilke:

There is scarcely anything more difficult than to love one another. That it is work, day labor, day labor, God knows there is no other word for it. And look, added to this is the fact that young people are not prepared for such difficult loving; for convention has tried to make this most complicated and ultimate relationship into something easy and frivolous, has given it the appearance of everyone's being able to do it. It is not so. Love is something difficult...

Young people... must not forget, when they love, that they are beginners, bunglers of life, apprentices in love – must *learn* love, and that (like *all* learning) wants peace, patience, and composure!

Sermon

I was waiting for the Braintree train on the outbound platform of Park Street station not long ago. It was mid-afternoon and crowded. On the other side of the tracks from me a man was playing the Simon and Garfunkel song “Sounds of Silence.” His voice wasn’t the best, but he sang as if he cared about the meaning of the words (as I expect he did). Yet only the occasional person among the dozens, hundreds of us, seemed to pay him (or each other for that matter) much mind.

It was a long wait for my train. Our singer repeated a verse, added one or two of his own. Then I saw that he had begun to sing toward a baby stroller; he was smiling. The song ended. The woman with the stroller put something into the singer’s basket. They chatted a moment.

The train’s light was now visible down the tunnel. The platforms had become even more crowded with people not paying much attention to each other. But there, fifty feet away on the other side of the tracks from where I stood, was a little bit of love. And we were *in it...* for a few moments anyway. (Or maybe it was this way: that a few of us noticed or felt we were in the love that is there all the time...)

Is love *all* you need? Whether on a train platform, in a household, in a community, a nation, a world?

Annie Dillard, in her book *Holy the Firm*, finds herself reading about angels:

Angels, I read, belong to nine different orders. Seraphs are the highest; they are aflame with love for God, and stand closer to him than the others. Seraphs love God; cherubs, who are second, possess perfect knowledge of him. So love is greater than knowledge; how could I have forgotten?

And UU minister Rebecca Parker, in an essay titled “Love First,” writes:

Maybe in the end love will save us all, but it has a lot better chance at the beginning. We need to love from the start – not as an emergency strategy when everything has gone wrong.

Okay. Love before knowledge. Okay. Love first... and last... and all the way through for that matter. In relationships. Now and then on a train platform. In our lives in community – maybe even our political lives.

But still... is love *all* you need, as the Beatles musically asserted about forty years ago?

Or might it be rather, to use the language of logic, that love is necessary, but not sufficient for our lives with one another.

Kurt Vonnegut once said that he didn’t worry if in the midst of an argument his wife told him she didn’t love him. For his experience was that love comes and goes and comes again. But if she had told him she didn’t respect him anymore, that, he said, would be serious.

So... does love, in order to last as more than a passing feeling or sentiment, need what we might call companion virtues? Is this what Annie Dillard may have been getting at when she wrote elsewhere that “Lasting love is an act of will”? Or Rilke when he suggested in the reading that love takes work? Good work to be sure. But work nevertheless. And work requires tools.

So we have Paul in his famous letter to the Corinthians.

Was Paul saying that love is all you need?

Well, again, not love only as a feeling, only as a greeting-card sentiment, not the love of infatuation, maybe not even deeper romantic love. Perhaps, though, a way of understanding love which can *include* all these, but at the same time transcend them, maybe keep these feelings alive... if we work at it with the proper tools, if we pay attention to it and to each other.

So... what *was* Paul saying? To begin with remember that he was writing a letter to a particular community of Christians in Corinth, a community trying to figure out what it meant to be this new thing called Christian. Among other things, these Christians in Corinth knew they were *supposed* to be loving... they were just having a hard time turning *supposed to be loving* into *actually being loving*! Paul wrote at the outset: "it has been reported to me... that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters."

Of course quarrels *are* part of just about any loving relationship; so maybe it was that these Corinthians weren't quarreling in a loving spirit.... So we might read Paul's words in terms of how to love even as we sometimes quarrel (indeed, I hope we can read his words in those terms, otherwise it is not very practical advice).

In his letter, then, after clarifying a variety of points of Christian doctrine and practice, Paul reminds the Corinthians of some of what love *is* and what love *isn't*. Love is patient and kind; love is not arrogant or rude or irritable, and love does not insist on its own way. Finally, love knows that the truth or right is more important than getting your own way. (Reading between the lines, we can begin to imagine how the Corinthians must have been behaving...)

Now, as I reflected on this passage this week (a passage I have read innumerable times at weddings and at funerals), it occurred to me for the first time that Paul was not so much directly giving advice as he was lifting up for the troubled folks in Corinth an image of what love looks like. Then they could see for themselves that they were not being altogether loving. And perhaps could begin to imagine how they could change in the direction of being more loving.

So it occurs to me that another way of putting Paul's message is this: When you are *in love*, not just the sentimental infatuation of one person with another, but in a place where your heart is open and loving... you will quite naturally be patient and kind, even-tempered, courteous; you will quite naturally be seeking the good of all, and not just insisting on your own way. This is what love looks like, Paul was saying.

But... of course we are not always in a loving place; our hearts are not always open and loving. What then?

Then (which might be a fair amount of the time after all) we can hear Paul's words as advice. Strive to be more patient and kind, compassionate, interested in everyone's well-being... (acts of will... tools of the trade...) and that may put you back into that loving place, may open your heart once again.

In other words, Paul was implying, like Rilke, that loving often – maybe not always, but often – takes work, that the aspiration to be more loving asks much of us. And isn't this how it should be with something of such great importance?

In short, we nurture and strive to achieve all these companion virtues of love and love itself the same way you get to Carnegie Hall in the old joke. We practice. We heard Rilke say we must "learn love." Or as Henry Drummond, in his little book on Paul's letter, *The Greatest Thing* put it, "Character grows in the stream of the world's life." This means that every day and often we have the opportunity to practice love's companion virtues. With our partners, our siblings, parents, children, friends, neighbors, strangers...

For we know (don't we?) that we *can't* get away with love as *only* a feeling, wonderful though that feeling is, anymore than flowers or candy once a year will save a failing relationship.

In this spirit, I often mention to couples who are preparing to get married a study which suggested that in successful relationships there are five times the amount of positive interactions as compared with negative. It is not magic! In our relationships – not only marriage, but all of our relationships – we *can* intentionally stack the deck, five to one.

And where does such practice get us? Toward *more love* of course. And this may not mean toward the relationship we imagined or hoped for – it is not that simple – but more love even so.

Philosopher Jacob Needleman puts it this way in his *A Little Book on Love*, that such willed practice of love's virtues begins from and moves towards our aspiration (however hidden, even to ourselves) toward *pure* love, toward love that transcends ego, that is wider than our usual (and understandable) small circles of concern. Again, it is not magic. It grows from practice.

St. Valentine, we are told, while imprisoned wrote letters to friends who were in need of solace and comfort. He was literally transcending the prison walls of his isolated self. And leaving behind a pretty good metaphor for the rest of us.

And in the chapter of Paul's letter just before the passage we read, Paul affirmed that we are like one body with many members. In other words, though we are each of us unique and separate, that is not all that we are. We are also part and parcel of one another. Maybe most of the time we forget that. But sometimes we get it, sometimes we are *in* this larger reality and *know it...* for a moment anyway. On a train platform. Or with someone we've known for a lifetime. Or in an old Meeting House.

Or in the wider community.

For we cannot finish this morning without reminding ourselves that love is not only about our personal lives, ending at our front doors or even ending at the church door. Yes, we live in intimate relationship with those closest to us, and we easily and appropriately use the word love to characterize these relationships and friendships. But love is also about, or surely ought to be about, our political lives as well.

Our greatest presidents, it seems to me – Lincoln surely – understood at least implicitly that politics at its best ought to be about striving to manifest love in our communities, in our nation, in the world, concern for the well-being of every person – all through the contentious and imperfect tools (sometimes even virtues) of the political process.

The candidates this year, as always, talk about this and that program or initiative aimed at improving the well-being of the American people and of all people. Isn't this about putting love into practice – at least aspiring towards love – in the real world of mortgages and health care and poverty and racism and climate change and war and peace?

There are I suppose all too many for whom politics is just about power and personal gain; and I don't think you can find the word "love" in our founding documents or in United Nations treaties. But don't we organize ourselves into a polis, a nation, a world, in order to further the well-being of each and every person? That's the ideal anyway. And isn't that about love, practicing love, aspiring toward love?

Those words I shared earlier from Rebecca Parker come from an essay that is *not* about personal or romantic love. It is about love in the polis – in our communities and in our nation. Love, she writes, is not just salve for the wounds after a disaster like Katrina, "a gesture of kindly help when the situation has become horrendously dire."

Rather, she affirms, we must bring love *first* to our political and economic decisions as to how and to whom we will allocate resources, care for the environment, and so on. Katrina was not just a natural disaster; it was a failure to put love first in our decision making, which means a failure to put justice and truth – civic companion virtues of love – first as well. That Chinese philosopher we heard from earlier knew all this. We should too.

So – *is* love all you need? Maybe the answer is “yes and no.”

Love is *not* all you need if you think love is a feeling only.

But if you understand that *the fullness of love* must include or be in partnership with many other qualities and virtues... which we can *practice* in the stream of our lives (so that now and then it even becomes “easy” as the Beatles sang all those years ago)... then maybe so... maybe so...

Love guiding, helping, in partnership with patience, generosity, kindness – and with wisdom and knowledge (remember, the cherubs, the angels of knowledge were right behind the seraphs, the angels of love).

Love, helping us to transcend our small selves, our small worlds.

Love first, last, all the way through.

As I once preached, “Life is short – love is long.” Indeed, as Paul wrote a long time ago, “Love never ends.”

So may it be.

Benediction – by Frederick E. Gillis

May the Love which overcomes all differences,

Which heals all wounds,

Which puts to flight all fears,

Which reconciles all who are separated,

Be in us and among us

Now and always.

So may it be.

