

Love 101: A Deeper, Wider Kind of Love
By Jennifer Forker
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Right off the bat, I'd like to explain why I chose a piece of Christian scripture -- from the New Testament -- for today's reading. It's a familiar thing, this First Corinthians, chapter 13, is it not? We hear it recited during a lot of weddings.

Trust me, I didn't have us sit through it yet another time because I thought a bunch of Unitarian Universalists -- of all people! -- needed a healthy dose of Christian scripture today.

I chose First Corinthians, chapter 13, for today's reading because it speaks to a point I'd like to make -- about love.

For starters, that familiar bit of holy Christian scripture has been interpreted wrong. For all these years, and in so many weddings, First Corinthians, chapter 13, has been recited to remind us what healthy or authentic love between two lovers is like. It is patient and kind; neither boastful nor arrogant. It "bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things."

The problem is, First Corinthians, chapter 13, has been lifted out of context to play its role at weddings. It's part of a letter the Apostle Paul wrote to the people of a congregation he founded in Corinth, the large and multicultural capital city of a Roman province. This was 54 years after Jesus' death.

The people of this congregation were likely as diverse as the city in which they lived. Most of them were gentiles -- non-Jews. Incidentally, Paul was not a Christian, either. He was a Jew. (If you want to learn more about *that*, I have a book title for you.)

Paul wrote the letter First Corinthians to settle disputes and unrest in the Corinthian congregation. In short, people were fighting (!). Imagine that. Church members were fighting among themselves (!). I have *never* heard of such a thing.

The entire letter that is First Corinthians, chapters 1 through 16, is Paul reminding Jesus' followers in Corinth that they must put aside their petty differences and unite; it is

a plea for unity. (It's also Paul telling these people to follow him; do as he says, not what other "false teachers" might say.)

Paul spells this out in the first chapter, verse 10: "Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters ... that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose. For it has been reported to me ... that there are quarrels among you ..."

OK, isn't this fun?

Church folk were quarreling among themselves two thousand years ago. And a church leader – the Apostle Paul -- was insisting that everyone think and do as he told them to think and do. I guess some things never change (!). We still have some of that going on in religious circles today, eh?

Incidentally, the Corinthian congregation must have had a lot of discord, because Paul wrote to them frequently. There are two letters, First and Second Corinthians, included in the Christian New Testament, right? Well, Second Corinthians is believed to have been Paul's *fourth* letter to these rascally people.

(I have to tell you that in the Hebrew Bible, also called the Old Testament, willful and disobedient folks often are called "a stiff-necked people." I just love that anachronistic term: "You are a stiff-necked people!" It shows up frequently in the Hebrew Bible).

I give you all this laborious background – first, because it's a great story; but primarily, because it gives you the historical background to First Corinthians, chapter 13: All that talk about love was a desperate attempt by Paul to smooth out differences among his people who lived at a great distance from him; it was a reminder to behave, because even two thousand years ago, during the infancy of the Christian church, members were not getting along.

We, years later, have tacked all these other meanings onto that passage, and we've romanticized it. Incidentally, I don't know when that began.

Well, don't feel badly if you had this famous verse about a "noisy gong" and "a clanging cymbal" in your own wedding. It is beautifully rendered prose; poetic. It makes a lot of people smile and relax inside when they hear it.

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How our society uses First Corinthians, chapter 13 – during declarations of undying, romantic love – is symptomatic of how our society views love.

We romanticize love, don't we?

We also trivialize it.

We think love is something that occurs between two people: "I love you; you love me; we are in love."

Love is something that we share among family members: We love our parents, our children, even our pets.

Love, often to a lesser degree, is shared among friends.

And that's about it, except that our society also perverts love – in the movies, it's often dangerous, deadly or dysfunctional. Marketers prey on our romanticizing of love to sell us ... products! They tell us we'll love ourselves more if we'll simply buy this dishwasher soap, or that snappy pair of blue jeans.

[Example in hand:]

I saved this coupon, received not long ago from an Old Navy clothing store, because it bothered me. It calls itself a \$20 "coupon" (I only have to spend \$40 or more to use it) and it's printed with, "Love-you tender" and "In happiness we trust."

The message? I will attain love and happiness if I buy Old Navy stuff.

Wow, if only love and happiness were that easy to obtain, right? *If only we could buy love and happiness*, we'd all run right out and do that, wouldn't we?

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I'd like to suggest here today that very few of us, myself included, know how to love. We talk in Unitarian Universalist churches about "Standing on the Side of Love." It is the national platform from which we do all kinds of social justice work. I really like that phrase, and the entire campaign.

I have held bright, yellow "Standing on the Side of Love" banners at immigrant rights rallies, at street corners in support of pro-choice abortion freedoms, and in front of

the Roman Catholic archdiocese compound in Denver (that's another story altogether). You've probably "stood on the side of love" both literally and figuratively, in Unitarian Universalist circles, and outside of them, too. We all have.

But, as we do this many-faceted work for social justice, as we wear our bright yellow T-shirts that scream, "STANDING ON THE SIDE OF LOVE," I often wonder, "Do any of us stop to think about what we're saying? Do any of us really know how to stand on the side of love?"

Because, I think we don't.

I don't think we're any different than any other people in any other church or denomination, or in any other country.

I simply don't think we understand what love is, so we don't know how to do love; we don't know how to *be* and share love.

If, as UUs, we did know this thing called love, we'd be a whole lot more welcoming to Christian people in our congregations. That's just one, really good example. There are thousands – no, *millions* -- of disaffected Christians in this country. Liberal Christians for whom their churches no longer fulfill their religious or spiritual needs. If UU people were smart, and *if we were truly loving*, we'd throw open our doors to these people, say "Welcome!" and grow our churches till they were *bulging*.

But we don't do this.

We are a stiff-necked people!

And that is just one example of how we don't embody love, even while we "stand on the side of love."

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The love that I'm getting at is not romantic. It is not erotic. It is neither familial nor platonic. It's not even personal. It is simply all-encompassing – a deep, wide love that opens to all people, all creatures, all of life. It is, I think, a love that is born of life itself. If you believe in a God – a spirit of life – this love is of *that*. It is divine love, not human love. It is in us, it works through us but it is not *of* us. It's transformative love.

I've seen it at work.

I've been blessed to have it working in my life, oftentimes unknown by me until much later.

I would *love (get it, love)* to hear your stories of divine love working wonders in your life, later, during coffee time and even after that, during our conversational time back here in this beautiful space.

This deeper, wider love, this divine love, requires so much more from each of us. Mystics through the ages have tried to help us understand this love – and how to love -- but we keep failing.

We fail because we're pretty darn comfortable mucking around in all these other, lesser forms of love. They're pretty good to us, we think.

Divine Love requires more of us, but it also gives us more. There's the rub.

It may require sacrifices and hard work, but its rewards are great, too.

Who is willing to make the sacrifices and do the work to love in this way?

Maybe you; maybe me.

Let's find out.

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I'm drawn to what the Jesuit priest Anthony de Mello, a modern-day mystic, had to say about all of this. In fact, I laughed out loud while reading his book, "Awareness: The Perils and Opportunities of Reality." The book was printed in 1990, three years after his death.

It's a bit of a shocker, but de Mello says that none of us knows how to love because we're all too selfish to stick our necks out *to love* – to love truly, deeply, from the essence of our beings. This is why we fixate on romantic love and love of family. Those forms of love often hinge on giving and receiving; they have conditions. But by comparison to divine love, those relationships are easier to do and maintain.

De Mello was a funny man. Remember the book, "I'm OK; You're OK," first published in 1967? I bet there are a lot of copies gathering dust at used bookstores, and on our own bookshelves. De Mello poked gentle fun at it. He said, "I'm going to write a book someday and the title will be 'I'm an Ass, You're an Ass.' That's the most

liberating, wonderful thing in the world, when you openly admit you're an ass. It's wonderful. When people tell me, 'You're wrong.' I say, 'What can you expect of an ass?'"

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So, one of the challenges of loving deeper and wider is being willing to look at ourselves – to examine in what ways we are lovable, and how we are not. That takes courage; it can hurt, or, as my sweet daughter Hope Clarke often says, “Hurtful!” Self-examination can be “hurtful.”

The last time I was here among you was in April; at that time we talked about Awareness. Another component of loving deeper and wider is this thing Awareness. Awareness helps us transcend the fabrications of our minds – the weird, little stories we tell ourselves to shore ourselves up – and helps us get in touch with Reality, how things really are.

Awareness helps us release our attachment to ego, that which keeps us locked down in our small, individual senses of self; Awareness helps release us from our habitual, negative thinking, so we might realize true, healthy Selfhood.

And that's a sacrifice. At least, our egos think so.

It is from here, from the Selfhood, that we can love deeper and wider, without exceptions.

I am not there, folks. I want you to know that.

There are people out there I don't like very much. I'm working on that.

I'm sure there are people who've hurt you and I'm not here to tell you that you need to love people who wound you. But I do think, when we tap into this awesome and powerful divine love, we can do anything, even forgive hurtful people their hurtful actions. It's just not something that has to happen, or that happens quickly, or easily.

We are not failures in loving if there are people we cannot love.

I'm trying to get better at tapping into this divine love; in the meantime, I'm still self-centered; I'm still focused on my personal well-being and happiness more than on that of others. I'm still an “ass,” as de Mello would put it.

You know, like nearly everyone else.
We are a stiff-necked people!
And this is why it's so difficult to love deeper and wider.

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De Mello said that when we wake up to Reality – when we realize we are more than these separate human bodies having human experiences, thoughts and emotions, then we *become* Love. We are transformed into Love.

We don't have to "Stand on the Side of Love," then, because we *are* Love! "Here, come stand by me!"

Do you know anyone who embodies Love in this way? I think of the Dalai Lama, who's well-known for his childlike sense of wonder and joy but who has seen so much suffering among his Tibetan people. The Dalai Lama does not harbor hate or a need for revenge against the Chinese, even though that government has been oppressing Tibet since 1950. He once said, "*They too are human beings who struggle to find happiness and deserve our compassion.*"

The Dalai Lama can step outside of his own ego and personhood. He has the Awareness that all people suffer and are deserving of compassion.

In late August, I attended a Buddhist retreat in Estes Park. The retreat leader, Thich Nhat Hanh, recommended using our meditation practice to channel our own suffering into compassion for all living creatures. This is what he does; this is what the Dalai Lama does.

From our woundedness, we grow compassion; we grow a deeper, wider Love.

Think about your own suffering, past and present. Does your suffering help you grow compassion for others who suffer? My own hurts help me remember to "BE KIND. (Because) everyone we meet is carrying a heavy burden."

For 25 years, I've carried that message on a small card in my wallet: "BE KIND. Everyone you meet is carrying a heavy burden." I found it in my wallet last week; it was good remembering.

I'm going to mention Jesus one more time, because it's appropriate; it fits. Also, I like to take every opportunity I can to rescue another of Jesus' teachings from really awful, wrong-headed interpretations, which are used to "other," ostracize and abnegate. Here's one of the biggest mistakes that born-again Christians make when reading their scriptures:

They think that when they are told they must be "born again" -- as it reads in the Gospel of John 3:3: "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above" -- that they must somehow have an experience of and with Jesus Christ that then somehow "proves" he or she is "saved."

"I am saved, but ... I'm not too sure about you" is kind of the thinking.

The problem is, they've chosen to interpret scripture in a minute and microscopic way, instead of in an inclusive and transformative way.

A transformative reading is what we're talking about today: We are "born from above" when we wake up from our ego-centeredness into the Awareness that we are truly connected, like the Seventh Principle says. It's a mysterious thing, this "*interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.*" Knowing that and feeling that, and acting out of that, is being born again.

The New Testament also mentions in several places that we need to "die to the self" to follow Jesus. Again, a literal reading might be that you have to surrender your entire self, body and soul, to Jesus Christ.

But a transformative reading is what we're talking about here: I die to my little-s "self" -- to my ego, my personality, my sense of who I am as a unique individual -- so I might be "born again" in the big-S "Self" and feel that connection to the Spirit of Life, to the essence of my being, and from there be able to love deeper and wider.

We detach from our egos and our striving for things -- possessions, power, people -- and we die to these attachments, and are reborn in Love.

Gosh, it sounds nice, huh?

And really lofty.

And unattainable.

I think it's why we come together in places like this one. I think it's why we attend church. A few weeks ago, Wendy Williams, the new senior minister at Jefferson

Unitarian Church in Golden, mentioned in a sermon that we attend church to “grow our hearts.”

I like that, not the least because it’s simple; direct.

We join together in communities like this one to practice good behavior (!). We practice loving each other and loving *into* ourselves, and someday, with each other’s help and kindness, we will finally die to ourselves.

And be born again.

Able to Love ... deeper, wider.

Able to Stand on the Side of Love ... and really mean it.

And then, only then, will we ... stop ... being ... a stiff-necked people!

Let’s keep talking about this.

Amen.

Namaste.