

Reading #1:

Our first reading today comes from the writer and preacher Frederick Buechner,

In his book *Wishful Thinking: A Seeker's ABC*, he writes:

“Love:

The first stage is to believe there is only one kind of love.

The middle stage is to believe that there are many kinds of love

And that the Greeks had a different word for each of them.

The last stage is to believe that there is only one kind of love.

The unabashed *eros* of lovers, the sympathetic *philia* of friends, the charitable *Agape* giving itself away freely –

These are all varied manifestations of a single reality.

To lose yourself in another's arms, or in another's company,

Or in suffering for all people who suffer, including the ones who inflict suffering upon you –

To lose yourself in such ways is to find yourself.

That's what it's all about.

That's what love is.

And of all powers, love is the most powerful and the most powerless.

It is the most powerful because it alone can conquer that final and most impregnable stronghold which is the human heart.

It is the most powerless because it can do nothing except by consent.

So in the religious sense, love is not primarily an emotion,

But an act of the will.

When we're told to love our neighbors, we're not being told to love them

By responding to them with a cozy emotional feeling.

You can as easily produce those kind of feelings on demand as you can

A yawn or a sneeze.

On the contrary,

What we're being told is to love in our neighbors in the sense of being

Willing to work for their well-being,

even if it means sacrificing our own.

Reading #2:

Love Sonnet 89 by Pablo Neruda

Our second reading comes from the Chilean poet Pablo Neruda. This is his poem called Love Sonnet 89.

When I die, I want your hands on my eyes:

I want the light and the wheat of your beloved hands
to pass their freshness over me once more:

I want to feel the softness that changed my destiny.

I want you to live while I wait for you, asleep.

I want your ears still to hear the wind, I want you
to sniff the sea's aroma that we loved together,
to continue to walk on the sand we walk on.

I want what I love to continue to live,
and you whom I love and sang above everything else
to continue to flourish, full-flowered:

so that you can reach everything my love directs you to,
so that my shadow can travel along in your hair,
so that everything can learn the reason for my song.

“Love Letters”
delivered on 2/14/2010 by Laura Randall

Happy Valentine’s Day! As you may have noticed, today’s service is a celebration of love. In case anyone is getting a bit nervous that this sermon is about to spiral into Hallmark territory, please know that I don’t want that either. There will be no rhyming couplets coming up. I’m not a gushy kind of person in general, although I find it hard to be too critical of a holiday that promotes chocolate.

In elementary school, we used to buy those boxes of pre-made Valentine’s cards, usually with a popular cartoon character theme, (I usually got Scooby Doo ones), and then we would exchange these cards with the whole class. Does anyone else remember these torturous exercises in 3rd diplomacy? I would study those cards very carefully to make sure that no one got the wrong message. Because those cards were practically legal contracts to kids. Heaven forbid that any boy would get a card from me that could be in any way interpreted as romantic. Cards that said, “Happy Valentine’s Day!” and “You’re a nice friend!” were at a premium. I have to say that I am not sad that that particular holiday stress is over. Still, in approaching this Sunday’s service, knowing it was on Valentine’s Day, visions of Necco candy message hearts and fat cupids danced in my head. I knew I wanted to talk about love today, but typical Valentine’s day love? The kind that shows up in those Kay Jewelers commercials? Yick.

I realize that these sentiments probably make me sound like the Ebenezer Scrooge of Valentine’s Day. That’s not it. I love love. Love is the center of my theology and my faith. Love is why I’m standing here right now. What I object to is the commercialization

of love. The message in our culture that gets louder on Valentine's day that love can and should conform to a particular vision and that this love is for sale. This message makes me so sad because it reduces love to a pale, ghostly reflection of itself and it encourages people to believe that this reflection is the real thing.

This is one reason I am so glad that the "Standing on the Side of Love" campaign which is sponsored by the Unitarian Universalist Association is encouraging us to Re-image Valentine's day by moving beyond the old Valentine's day stereotype of straight couples exchanging flowers out of a sense of duty and moving to a place where the power of love is used to transform whole communities.

So what did I do to combat the cynicism I was feeling toward Valentine's day? I did the obvious thing. I read lots and lots of love poetry.

I've been reading love poetry instead of essays or treatises on love because for me something as important and profound as love tends to slip through the grasp of language, especially if too many words try to fence it in. Poetry, my favorite form of the written word, seems a better means for catching snippets of the larger truth of love.

So I have been reading love poems. I've been collecting them from all over the world and spanning thousands of years of human history. I've been reading the Song of Songs, that epic love poem found in the Hebrew Scriptures, which we read in part as our opening reading. "Rise, my love, my beautiful one, come away..." Bible scholars love to debate whether the Song of Songs is a version of a Mesopotamian nuptial ritual or is an allegory for God's love for his people. I like to think it's both. "Rise, my love, my beautiful one, come away..."

I've been reading Rumi, the 13th century Sufi poet who longs for union with God, whom he calls his Friend and Beloved.

I've been reading the poems of Mirabai, the 16th century Hindu mystic, who was shunned by her family for the intense and ecstatic devotion she displayed for her beloved Krishna.

"I can't forget about love for more than two seconds," Mirabai writes to Krishna.

"I get dizzy if I think about anything but the way you pant in my ear."

I've been reading the 16th century poetry of St. Theresa of Avila and her contemporary, St. John of the Cross. Poets, who like many Christian saints, were persecuted in their own time for being too radical.

I've been reading more recent poets, like Walt Whitman, Jane Hirshfield, and, of course, Pablo Neruda. When I found Neruda's poem, which I shared with you, Love Sonnet 89, my breathing changed as I read it. I was literally left breathless by the beauty and the truth of it. That's the test of a great love poem, when it doesn't describe love but urges you to feel it.

Here's the really amazing thing I've discovered: a great love poem, like love, destroys time and space. A great love poem, like love, removes the barriers of nationality, gender, religion, and history. A great love poem creates a world where nothing exists but the author and the reader. It creates a relationship between them, a relationship which feels magical. A great love poem is a love letter between souls.

Here's the other amazing thing I discovered: whether the poet was intending to address a lover or the divine, there was really no difference in the love expressed. As Frederick Buechner writes, "there is only one kind of love."

When Rumi writes:

The minute I heard my first love story

I started looking for you, not knowing

how blind that was.

Lovers don't finally meet somewhere.

They're in each other all along.

Is he speaking to a human lover, or to God?

When Pablo Neruda writes:

I want what I love to continue to live,

and you whom I love and sang above everything else

to continue to flourish, full-flowered:

is this a message for his beloved companion or for the sacred earth he cherishes?

I prefer to believe it is all of the above. When I said before that the center of my theology is love, I meant that very literally. The simple sentence, “God is love” is the shortest way to sum up what I believe. But this phrase is repeated so often that it can sound trite. For me, “God is love” doesn’t necessarily mean that God is a giant loving person gazing down adoringly at us from above, although sometimes I do like to imagine Her that way.

No, for me the divine is even simpler and more miraculous than that. Love, that surprising, delighting, complex, and vital connection between two beings is what is holy.

It is not me alone and it is not you alone but it is what occurs between us when we meet and make connection. It is that feeling that comes when we acknowledge that connection and cherish it. It is the relationship that exists between us that makes us more than the sum of our parts. That is the love I call divine, the love I call God. Perhaps “Love is God” is another way I could define it if I wanted to be so brash as to try to place a definition on Divine Mystery.

The Jewish theologian Martin Buber saw the divine in a similar way. He felt that all meaningful human interaction stemmed from relationship which he termed “I and Thou.” Buber believed that we could only become whole by living in relationship. He wrote, “I require a You to become; becoming I, I say You. All actual life is encounter.”

This process of becoming whole through relationship, through love, is this an act of creation or of recognizing what was there all along? Do we create love or does love create us? I think it is both.

The Muslim poet Hafiz touched on this when he wrote:

God revealed a sublime truth to the world,

when He sang,

“I am made whole by your life.

Each soul,

Each soul completes me.”

That is the miracle of love, the power that makes you whole, that completes you while at the same time causing you to forget yourself.

“These are all varied manifestations of a single reality,” Frederick Buechner writes.

To lose yourself in another’s arms, or in another’s company,

Or in suffering for all people who suffer, including the ones who inflict suffering upon you –

To lose yourself in such ways is to find yourself.

That's what it's all about.

That's what love is.”

“To lose yourself in such ways is to find yourself.” These two seemingly contradictory truths give love its sublime wildness, that wonderful chaotic tension that leaves us deliciously out of control. Love is the greatest teacher of surrender.

“Love, you have wrecked my body,” Mirabai writes.

“Keep doing that.”

This losing and finding ourselves in love is profound business. It's tempting to call it serious yet at the core of love there is delight. St. Teresa of Avila, a saint made famous by her ecstatic visions of God, reminds us of the joy to be found in love with this poem:

Just these two words He spoke changed my life,

“Enjoy Me.”

What a burden I thought I was to carry –

A crucifix, as did He.

Love once said to me, “I know a song,

Would you like to hear it?”

And laughter came from every brick in the street

And from every pore in the sky.

After a night of prayer,

He changed my life when

He sang,

“Enjoy Me.”

Love is awakening. Love is surrender. Love is enjoyment. Love breaks you down and builds you up. Over and over again.

These poems I have shared with you today were all written by people in love. In love with their partners, in love with their God, in love with their world. They are love letters from their souls to that which they cherish most.

To whom does your soul long to compose a love letter to? Perhaps your partner or spouse, the person with whom you share more of yourself than any other. Perhaps a friend who has been your steadfast companion through some of the darkest days of your life. Perhaps your children, who have shaped your heart as much as you have shaped theirs. Perhaps your soul aches with love for our planet, our precious earth that sustains and renews us day after day, season after season. Perhaps your soul calls out to that Divine Mystery that exists within us and beyond us, that Mystery who you can swear calls back to us with that same love.

It has been said that every life is a love story. So much of our lives are defined by who we love and who loves us. This Valentine’s day, I hope you will take a moment to take stock of the love in your life. Tell your Beloved, in whatever form your Beloved takes, how you cherish that love. Tell your Beloved, in the words of Pablo Neruda, that you “want to feel the softness that changed your destiny.” But don’t just tell your Beloved, tell the whole world, “so that everything, everything, can learn the reason for your song.”

Tell the world of your love for your partner, your friend, your children, your brother, your sister, your neighbor, your community, your world. Sing about that love so that we may all know another precious piece of the Mystery. Tell the love story that is your life so that the separation between us dissolves away and there is connection, if only for an instant, as I see the compassion of your soul burn with holy light and you feel that same warmth within me. Every life is a love story, with all the component parts that draw us to love stories. Passion, doubt, elation, longing, solace, loss, delight, disappointment, joy, tears, and wisdom. Every life is a love story. Let us remember this as we gaze upon one another. Let us honor and celebrate these love stories, these lives, so that everything can learn the reason for our song.

Please join me in saying Blessed Be.