

“Blame Aphrodite”
February 22, 2015
The Unitarian Church in Charleston
Rev. Danny R. Reed

“Love doesn’t just sit there, like a stone, it has to be made, like bread;
remade all the time, made new”
—Ursula K. Le Guin

Seventh -century poet Sappho left her weaving to follow the beckoning of love. There’s something to be said for such intoxication of the wits, but that’s best left to movies and novels. Love, beyond romanticism, is a demand and a discipline. Is loving the world really abandon or can we stay at the loom and still heed a deeper call?

A couple, known for their long and apparently harmonious marriage, was asked to share their secret. They reported that they take time to enjoy an evening out, twice each week. They go to a nice restaurant, enjoy a little candlelight dinner, soft music, and an unhurried walk home. This practice has kept them happily together for years. She goes Tuesdays; he goes Fridays.

We had a wedding here at church yesterday, a lovely couple. The groom was Korean and parts of the ceremony were new to him. At Friday night’s rehearsal, he held his bride’s hands and pledged “to have and to hold, for better or worse, for richer or poorer, In sickness and in hell.” Before the actual wedding, I found him in the back room here, repeating to himself, “health, health, health.” And he did just fine, by the way.

We make too many negative jokes about marriage, and often in our self-deprecating humor, we do make committed relationships sound rather hellish. We forget too soon the intoxication of attraction and the intensity of romance—the infatuation and passion that can initially confuse and distract, but that, come what may, can eventually, sometimes quickly, realign priorities and clarify intentions.

We know very little about seventh century Greek lyric poet, Sappho and only remnants of what is assumed to be a larger body of work exist. Yet she captures timeless affection that spans the ages.

One ancient poem is translated in contemporary fashion:

Mother dear, I
can't finish my
weaving
 You may
blame Aphrodite

soft as she is

she has almost
killed me with
love for that boy

—Sappho, translated by Mary Barnard

As delightful and delirious as such love can be, and as liberating to flee the loom at the call of the heart, someone must still staff the spinning wheel and weave. If we remained love-drunk, reveling in endearment, we would likely accomplish little else. Necessary obligations and other essential attachments also beckon and also give meaning to life, and of course, fund our lives in employment and sustenance.

Maintaining healthy marriages and sustaining primary relationships is work. Staying married calls for discipline and mutual sacrifice, a transfer of interest from self to partner—and in family life, the transfer expands from self to partner, and to child or children, and to car payment, mortgage, orthodontist and PTA meeting.

But it would do us good to remain under Aphrodite's influence, not completely, but longer into our years than some of us allow. Unforeseen incompatibility and irreconcilable differences are real dimensions of adult relationships. The more couples I marry and the longer I am married, the more I see staying married as a characteristic challenge of our day. Yet some of Sappho's abandon and whimsey could prove to revitalize mature love and keep home fires burning. Maybe being nearly slain, *nearly* slain, in love for that boy, for that girl, is the kind of near death experience what would call us to appreciate our significant other in abiding and renewable ways.

Those of us who are straight, who may have taken the freedom to wed for granted, are being reminded of the honor and privilege of marriage as we witness our gay brothers and lesbian sisters fight for that same standard. We are seeing in ways we may have forgotten to appreciate, the power of commitment and the duties of love. Surely our Supreme Court will soon resolve any lingering national hesitations so that marriage equality be, undeniably, the law of the land.

Whatever a couple's orientation, though, marriage is still work and married love is still a decision more than an encompassing emotion. Staying married involves sticking it out, agreeing to disagree, and sometimes agreeing to settle a lesser issue in support of a larger one. It is agreeing to do certain things and to not do others. I saw an interview with George Harrison's widow, who when asked the secret of their, by celebrity norms, long marriage, said that the key was agreeing to not get divorced.

With all due thanks to the poets and balladeers, and the greeting card industry, interpersonal, committed love is a decision, not a feeling. It is not a one time action but rather a choice that requires proper attention, care and feeding for the lifetime of those involved.

The rubric is similarly true for families. Poet Robert Hayden knew something about self-sacrificing love, he wrote of a father demonstrating it poignantly. I read what follows at one of our Father's Day picnic services but as the poem speaks of "Winter Sundays," today is a fine day to offer Hayden's words again.

Sundays too my father got up early
and put his clothes on in the blueblack cold,
then with cracked hands that ached
from labor in the weekday weather made
banked fires blaze. No one ever thanked him.

I'd wake and hear the cold splintering, breaking.
When the rooms were warm, he'd call,
and slowly I would rise and dress,
fearing the chronic angers of that house,

Speaking indifferently to him,
who had driven out the cold
and polished my good shoes as well.
What did I know, what did I know
of love's austere and lonely offices?

—Robert Hayden, “Those Winter Sundays”

“What did I know, what did I know of love's austere and lonely offices?” What do I know sufficiently now? Or do I simply know more than I once did? The angers in my house weren't chronic but I know I spoke indifferently to him. I don't recall my father ever polishing my good shoes, but I suppose he did. I do recall, however, what was for me a profound example of love's austere and lonely offices.

My father, Ray, is a middle child amidst his seven siblings, four of whom survive today. His mother suffered a stroke in her 50's and was left paralyzed on the left side of her body. For thirty subsequent years, she would amble with a leg brace and a walker. One weekend a month, she spent the weekend in our house. Her monthly visit allowed me the fun chance to sleep on the family sofa while she occupied my bed, and from an early age, I was appointed her gofer, clearing the path for her and retrieving this or that.

But it is my father's tasks that I celebrate. Mother and Son rose early on the Sundays of her stay, to prepare for church. My job was to fetch a basin and fold a plump bath towel into a makeshift seat to rest atop the commode in my father's bath. With my delivery complete, the door would close. Unable to do so herself, my father would bathe his mother in preparation of the most important external social connection in her life. My father bathed his disabled mother for church. Of course, beyond my simple job, I was never present and the matter was handled with discretion and a kind of reverence. Not for the human activity of bathing, but

for the attendant care extended to my grandmother through the loving kindness of my father.

“What did I know, what did I know of love’s austere and lonely offices?” I knew nothing, but I was watching and now, older than he was then, and he about the same age as she was then, I do know something of love’s austere and lonely offices?” I know because he modeled it, likely without knowing he was modeling anything.

Born with a few infant maladies, my parents spent hours in waiting rooms and doctor’s office for me well into my elementary years. Already, I’ve had a few chances to return the favor and sit in family rooms, awaiting of the outcome of their procedure or surgery, and I suspect I will again. I’ve polished my boy’s shoes a time or two and at fifteen, he’s giving me my share of being spoken to indifferently. Family life, and I mean this with multiple understandings of what constitutes a family, is often all about finishing the weaving, working the warp and woof effectively in the hope of fashioning a figurative sturdy and protective security cloth to cloak and cover those I care most about.

I am not unique, just as you do too, I do these things, and much more, for my parents and for my wife and children because I do love them so. Because life and love demand it of me, and because even if it didn’t, I would do it anyway. Because in service to them, and though I sometimes fail, supporting them and their endeavors helps remind me of who and who’s I am.

And from love of persons, there is love for people. As activist and scholar Cornel West put it, “Never forget that justice is what love looks like in public.” Public love is justice made manifest, it is the family of humanity taking care of one another, both for individual relief and support and also for the common good. Public love, or neighborly love, or even patriotic love, is the demand that our national, regional and more local leaders follow the better angels and enact law and policy that seeks justice and equity while allowing for community enrichment and growth. Public love is the insistence that those in seats of authority and influence be connected to the lives of those with whom they share allegiance and access. Public love is the impetus toward equity and fair citizen representation in the decision-making and policy-drafting process. Public love is what calls us into

justice projects with our neighboring congregations again and again, and is what inspires so many of you to serve so thoroughly. Public love is participative and demanding, it can be risky and involves great patience. Public love also asks that we be willing to give of ourselves and lend our resources of talent, time, and treasure wherever needed.

Carter Heyward sums up all this well: “Love, like truth and beauty, is concrete. Love is not fundamentally a sweet feeling; not, at heart, a matter of sentiment, attachment, or being “drawn toward.” Love is active, effective, a matter of making reciprocal and mutually beneficial relation with one’s friends and enemies.

Love creates righteousness, or justice, here on earth. To make love is to make justice. As advocates and activists for justice know, loving involves struggle, resistance, risk. People working today on behalf of women, blacks, lesbians and gay men, the aging, the poor in this country and elsewhere know that making justice is not a warm, fuzzy experience. I think also that sexual lovers and good friends know that the most compelling relationships demand hard work, patience, and a willingness to endure tensions and anxiety in creating mutually empowering bonds.

For this reason loving involves commitment. We are not automatic lovers of self, others, world, or God. Love does not just happen. We are not love machines, puppets on the strings of a deity called “love.” Love is a choice—not simply, or necessarily, a rational choice, but rather a willingness to be present to others without pretense or guile. Love is a conversion to humanity—a willingness to participate with others in the healing of a broken world and broken lives. Love is the choice to experience life as a member of the human family, a partner in the dance of life, rather than as an alien in the world or as a deity above the world, aloof and apart from human flesh.”

—Carter Heyward, *A Passion for Justice*

Through the vehicle of this venerable church, we have accomplished much, yet there is always more to take on. Here we honor interpersonal love, we praise familial love, and we kindle public love. We often get it right, though we sometimes stumble, and we persevere with the blessing of new revelation, understanding, and wisdom. We are learners, and we are learning more and more, just as we have over the long life of this congregation.

I realize this has been a sermon without a beginning nor an end. This time, I've started in the middle, and here we stay. For love is a slippery thing—one diminished when addressed too unrealistically, and one undermined when addressed too rigidly. We are learners, students of love, learning to love and to be found lovable, again and again.

“Won't forget, can't regret, What I did for love” sang the dancer in the chorus line. Catchy lyric, moving tune, but no, not necessarily true. I did stuff for love that I wouldn't mind forgetting, that I do regret, and I'm assured that I'm not the only one. And we love Lennon and McCartney. While they were wiser than their years when they said it, actually, we need more than love. I wish all we needed was love, but we also need change for the meter, empathy, to get enough sleep, a living wage, patience, respect, a little sex is nice, and a sense of humor sure helps. We need more than love, but I'll grant that we need love first.

We can blame Aphrodite for our wanderlust, and there's not a thing wrong with savoring the delights of romance and reasonable folly, so long as we remember, that with loving hearts and willing hands, for our neighbor, our family, and for ourselves, we can step away from the weaving, we can better understand love's austere and lonely offices, we can create righteousness, here on earth, we can make health of hell. AMEN.