

**I Will Write the Evangel-Poem of Comrades and of Love
February 17th, 2008**

Since Valentine's Day seems, to me, to be dominated, largely, by popular and commercial culture, I would like to take the liberty of beginning today's sermon with a pop culture reference myself—specifically, a Hollywood movie that came out in 1979 when I, at fourteen, was keenly crouched at the starting blocks of my career as a hopeless romantic. The movie was called, appropriately, *A Little Romance*, and centered on an American girl and a French boy who meet and fall in love in Paris, but who quickly find their love is threatened by the news that the girl must soon move back with her parents to America.

Encountering a wise older character, played endearingly by the late, great Laurence Olivier, the two teens learn from him that, despite looming separation, they can make their love

eternal. All they need to do is go to Venice, and kiss, on a gondola, at sunset, as the bells are ringing, under the Bridge of Sighs. And this, indeed, they manage to do, all to the tune of the stunning accompanying strings of Antonio Vivaldi.

Now back then, as the budding romantic that I was, I can tell you, I could not have asked for a better way to spend my Saturdays than to take the bus to the local cinema and watch *A Little Romance* and the magic it promised, over and over again.

Alas, as a graying and, yes, single, adult, looking back on those days, I can tell you and myself now that “When I was a child... I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child,” and that, as much as I loved spending my days tucked romantically away in the cinema, heart-plucking movies like *A Little Romance* made me a true and qualified practitioner of love, not. Little good did Laurence Olivier or the Bridge of

Sighs do me as I rode around Suburban Portland, Oregon, on my BMX bike, in my Kristy McNichol hairdo, swooning after Susan Duncan, the goalie on the girls' varsity soccer team, or as I cheered on my big brother's ridiculously good looking classmate, Roman Romando, and the rest of the perfectly feathered boys' basketball team.

For what spending my days watching movies like *A Little Romance* neglected to teach me was that true love couldn't actually be learned by anonymously watching it unfold in someone else's script. True love, guided more by the golden rule than the silver screen, demanded I be *in* the story, that I "put an end to childish ways," and examine love's deepest currents running, unyielding, underneath the predominantly popular and commercial culture of days like Valentine's Day.

Now, because of such revelation, that doesn't mean that I'm about to preach to you that you must abandon roses for

reason, sensuality for selflessness, affection for asceticism, *eros* for *agape*. I'm not asking for an either/or world. I simply want to talk with you about how we—as individuals, some of us as couples, some of us as families with children, and all of us as community—I want to talk with you about how we live in love.

The story of love, whether between lovers, friends, or whole communities, may begin with ordinary days made suddenly extraordinary, as in Wendy Cope's poem, "The Orange": "That orange, it made me so happy, as ordinary things often do/just lately. / The shopping. A walk in the park. / This is peace and contentment. It's new..... I love you. I'm glad I exist." Oh, the deliciousness of such days—the sweetness, the exquisiteness of newfound love.

Newfound love, which, if we are lucky, and we are willing, and it's meant to be, grows deeper, and slower, and steadier as two people get to know each other, and themselves, better.

To determine *how* lucky, and *how* willing, and *how* meant to be together we are, little tests will come along. Table manners, for instance, or in this context, pew and pulpit manners. How about the question of how late for a date is fashionably late and how late is too late to ever date that person again? Is this one still a candidate for love if his candidate for office is not your cup of political party? Is this one still on the *menu* for love if she goes off the vegetarian wagon while you stay on?

Little tests like that and, do you *have* love, *truly* have love, for one another? For, "If I speak in the tongues of mortals and angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or clanging cymbal." Love, First Corinthians says, "is patient; love is kind;

love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way.” If you are telling someone, by the way, even in the greatest eloquence of angels, that you love her or him, simply so that you may get *your* own way, slow down. Stop. Ask yourself where love went, and see if you can find it again. Love doesn’t lie. “Love rejoices in the truth.”

Love rejoices in the truth and brings us more authentically together, but it also, I believe, becomes our greatest companion, transforming itself into compassion, when we must live in the truth of letting go of those we love. And letting go, from the moment of birth onward, awaits us with everyone we love. Whether we’re sending our child off to kindergarten or to college or to war; whether we’re seeing our partner off to work for the day or for a year; whether we are saying goodbye to our lover for an hour or for eternity, letting go must come love’s way.

Now, according to the speaker in Elizabeth Bishop's poem, "One Art," this is no big deal, really. "The art of losing isn't hard to master;" she writes. "So many things seem filled with the intent/to be lost that their loss is no disaster." Now, as far as I can tell, Bishop's speaker is either extremely enlightened in the practice of detachment or she's working very hard to fool herself, and I would have to bet on the latter. For as she ups the ante—"practice losing farther, losing faster: places, and names, and where it was you meant to travel. None of these will bring disaster"—as she ups the ante, it is as if her grief for all she's lost begins to unfold undeniably and irretrievably before her. "I lost two cities, lovely ones. And vaster, some realms I owned, two rivers, a continent. I miss them," (she guardedly admits), "but it wasn't a disaster."

Finally, though still holding on to minimalizing, rationalizing, and plain old denying, she confesses, "Even

losing you (the joking voice, a gesture/ I love) I shan't have lied. It's evident the art of losing's not *too* hard to master/ though it may look like (*Write it!*) like disaster." It is as if, to the very end of the poem, Bishop's speaker is racing against grief to convince herself she is without it. However convincing she may try to be, though, all that remains is the depth, the breadth, and the intimacy of love and its loss. All that is left is that, and the poet, alone, to write about it.

And, of course, there is the poem. The poem that is, almost despite itself, a love poem. The poem that I read, and which calls me to ask as I read it, is this how I want to love, trying to convince myself that losing love is an art I can master?

Looking at my own life, I hope never to master the loss of my oldest brother, or my parents, or my friends who have died. To try to master such losses would be to try to bottle up

how much I miss them, and to try to stop missing them would be to try to stop loving them. Why would I want to master that?

Well, despite my meaning for that to be a rhetorical question, perhaps here is an answer: Love breaks our hearts. It breaks our hearts and so we search for ways to protect ourselves so we never have to have our hearts break again. But the catch is—and this can take quite a while, like a lifetime or two, to learn—the catch is that the way *love* breaks our hearts, is that it breaks them *open*. It breaks them open to still greater love, and greater compassion.

And greater love and greater compassion, if appreciated, if nourished, lead to more loving and more compassionate *action*. The golden rule, doing unto others as you would have others do unto you, is set in motion, and beloved and compassionate people of this congregation, with each

revolution of this turning toward true love, and away from isolation, away from alienation, away from oppression, let us not miss being on that journey of love.

Walt Whitman, the great wanderer and observer and practitioner of love, wrote, “I will write the evangel-poem of comrades and of love, for who but I should understand love with all its sorrow and joy?” Who but I—who but we—indeed? Don’t we all, if we *let* ourselves, know, quite deeply, love with all its sorrow and joy? Whitman, of course, was one of the first great American poets writing openly, a century or so before his time, about his love for other men. A whole century later, and more, for a man, gay or straight or somewhere in between, to express his love for another man is still to risk ridicule, violence, religious intolerance, and the passing of ignorant and demeaning laws. A whole century later, and more, however, religious movements like Unitarian Universalism and religious

communities like Wildflower Church, have chosen to stand on the side of love, and protest such violence, ignorance, and intolerance. In fact, you choose to stand on the side of love and be, officially, a welcoming congregation to lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered people. You welcome them so much, you even put them—us—behind the pulpit. But, dear friends, though we may find such welcoming almost second nature, remember it's not every place, certainly not every church that celebrates this particular kind of diversity of love. And remember that we ourselves have more opportunities to diversify how *we* show our love.

First Corinthians says that love “bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.” So this past Wednesday, exploring how Wildflower Church might show such hopeful, enduring, and expanding love, I attended the 2008 Poverty Roundtable, presented in part by Caritas of

Austin, to whom our second offering will go today. There I learned that one in six households in Texas is food insecure, meaning that these households don't always know if they will have the resources to get their food. The annual cost of such hunger and food insecurity, in Texas alone, is \$9 billion. That includes the cost of charity; of treating diet-related illnesses; and of lowered productivity in the work force.

Wildflower Church can show enduring love, and expanding love by expanding how we do outreach to the hungry and the poor of our community. I've got a whole list of resources in Travis County, who will welcome our support and our love. I also have the knowledge that our own Karen Schrupp and the rest of the social action committee will welcome your love as well, if you join them in the 30th annual CROP hunger walk, March 1st and 2nd. For while it is a wonderful thing to say, "At lunchtime I bought a huge

orange...and that orange, it made me so happy.... I love you, I'm glad I exist," one must be able to acquire the orange and eat the orange in order to taste its sweetness.

Similarly, one must be able to come in contact with love, live in the story of love, in order to taste both its sorrow and its joy. Who in this world will come in contact with love today, and what role will you play? Will you watch safely from the cinematic shadows, sighing longingly for the day you find eternal love under the Bridge of Sighs? Or will you let your heart break open, and share itself, its love, and its compassion, with the world? ... May you seek love. May you find love. May you be love.

Amen.