

WHAT IS REQUIRED OF US?

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One of my favorite Bible verses is from Micah 6:8—"What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God." He says that God does not require sacrifices of sheep or rams, your firstborn, or rivers of oil—only justice, kindness, and humility. In other verses, the Bible urges us to love our neighbors and also to love our enemies—probably because they are generally the same people!

Love ranges from intense affection for a partner or family member, strong attachment based on shared interests, or an expression of affection such as "send him my love" (*American Heritage*).

Love can be a beautiful part of our lives, yet I wonder if anyone stayed away today because that was to be the topic of this sermon! People have a wide range of stories about love, not all of them pretty. Love coupled with respect and affection gives us a feeling of belonging and worth. The word love may come from the mouths of insincere people, who respect not who you are, but what they can get from you.

Lyndon Johnson had a saying attributed to him: "When a man tells you that he loves you, button your back pocket."

An example of third party love shows up on church marquees quoting 1 John (4:19): "We love because He first loved us". Does that mean if HE didn't love us, you wouldn't either? And that word HE does not always mean God or Jesus, it can be a spiritual leader, a charismatic political demagogue, or even a Jim Jones, who loved his flock so much that he killed them all.

Matthew McNaught, minister at First UU in the 80's, delivered a sermon called "Is Love Enough?" He suggested that the word "love" in the Bible might be replaced with the word "respect." "Respect Your Neighbor as Yourself", "Respect One Another", "For God so respected the world, he gave his only begotten son."

In multiple religions, love ranges from an attitude of kindness and compassion, service to others, and even sacrificial love. Here is an example of each: From Hinduism: "What sort of religion can it be without compassion? You need to show compassion to all living beings. Compassion is the root of all religious faiths" (Basavanna, Vacana 247). From Sikhism: "Without selfless service are no objectives fulfilled; in service lies the purest action (Adi Granth, Maru, M.1, p. 992).

From a Kenyan traditional religion: "It is not always physical bravery that counts. One must have the courage to face life as it is, to go through sorrows and always sacrifice oneself for the sake of others" (Kipsigis saying, Kenya).

[All quotes found in *World Scripture: A Comparative Anthology of Sacred Texts*, a project of the International Religious Foundation, 1991.]

Love is expressed in multiple ways. I know someone who "loves everybody." He freely distributes hugs, signs every letter and email "with love", and would be offended if it were suggested that he did NOT love everyone! Yet this person has a core that cannot accept or express love at all, cannot maintain a one-to-one relationship with another person, but hops around "loving" a new person and cause every day. Even in a dating relationship he is looking over her shoulder for a better prospect. He exudes optimism but I wonder where his core of respect and affection lie. Can he truly love himself or anyone else?

Another man I know is a quiet, thoughtful person who has little to say, but who acts out his love on a daily basis. He has had the same friends for years, at least since high school. He talks and listens to his children, he stays in touch with people; he asks questions about how people important to him are doing. He gives anonymously to causes, and has even given his clothing to a stranger. No, this isn't Jesus, it's someone who is alive today, living in Texas, someone you would pass on the street without noticing.

There is also anonymous love, a person who expresses love without any relationship. Do people who receive that kind of love really feel the love? When working in a Katrina shelter last fall, I saw a printed sheet put into packets of donated goods. It said: "I love you because you are special" and it was sent to hundreds of people. It did no harm, might have made some people feel good and it was certainly better than an insult.

In dating relationships, the "L" word is often a carefully thought out thing to say. Who says it first, do you reply "I love you, too" because the other person said it, or because you really feel it? Does the other person really mean it or is this manipulation? Maybe you felt it first and were afraid to say anything. Maybe one of you has been burned before. But the relationship changes when "love" is mentioned or written. Why is that?

To some people, the word "love" opens them up to a great need that they have. Others cannot accept love, no matter how heartfelt, because they have been damaged by what people have done in the name of love.

Some of us get a second chance at love and marriage, like Phil Barnhart and Sandy Allen did at a recent wedding. Each of them has a daughter from a previous marriage, and each girl walked her parent down the aisle. Margaret, 9 years old, thinks her dad must really be in love, because of all the hand holding lately. Mason, 18-months old, wore a dress that matched her mom's and was the epitome of adorable as they walked down the grassy aisle toward me.

Phil and Sandy made their promises: "I wish to be your partner, your friend, and your traveling companion so that we may go through life together. Loving what I know of you, trusting what I do not yet know, I would share whatever life may bring to us: Good times or hardship, success or failure, sickness or health, laughter or tears. I ask only that you be true to yourself, and honest and patient with me."

As they journey through life together, sometimes they will walk hand in hand; sometimes they'll barely see each other. Though they will share moments of glory and valleys of darkness, most of their days will be ordinary ones. What will make it worthwhile are the times when one sees something so wonderful they will call out, "Look! Look!" And together they will recognize more beauty than either could possibly have seen alone.

I encouraged Sandy and Phil to cultivate patience, laughter and honest humility to sanctify their marriage. It takes a lot more than love alone, but I think Phil and Sandy, along with Margaret and Mason, have a good chance to build a loving family.

Mixed feelings about love also characterize how many of us feel about the concept of God. To some of us, the word "God" brings a warm feeling of being cared for.

For many others, it revives old family and community hurts done in the name of God. For others it means nothing more than a superstitious abstraction.

My earliest lesson in theology was that God is Love. All of these different expectations of love—from families of origin to families of choice; from friendships to partnerships—all of it together makes for an interesting expectation that a church will be a loving community.

Cecil Williams, a United Methodist minister who moved to San Francisco and into Glide Memorial Church, was a speaker at my seminary a few years back. He told the congregation: "I am never going to tell you that God loves you and leave it at that. What I can say is that I will try to love you and I want you to try and love other people. That's what I think Jesus wants us to do"

On Glide's opening web page it proclaims, "Come to a place where unconditional love changes lives every day, and hope triumphs over sorrow. Everyone is welcome." Putting love into action, Cecil changed both the policies and practices of the conservative church, helping to create the Council on Religion and Homosexuality in 1964. Cecil took the cross down in the sanctuary in 1967, exhorting the congregation to celebrate life and living instead of the death of Jesus.

The church offered a safe space to groups ranging from the Hookers Convention to the American Indian Movement and the Black Panthers. In the midst of their political work, Glide never forgot the basic needs of the community. The meals program was launched in the 1960s, serving one free dinner a week to everyone who came.

Poverty, drug abuse, violence, and despair persist in San Francisco as they do across the country. But in four decades of work to address these problems, Glide serves as an oasis in a desert of hopelessness, marching to the edge where victories for social justice are won. Glide is a place where old, destructive ways of being are thrown out and new ones created. Where love is celebrated and a simple call of welcome goes out to all races, classes, genders, ages, and sexual orientations.

The poetry written by singer/songwriter John Flynn at this month's coffeehouse teaches us that our good works and our good words can make a difference, if only

to one soul. He sings about a dream in which he has a conversation with a young man. Here's an excerpt from his song "Only One":

"One night in restless sleep I dreamt a young man came to me
and asked what I had done that day to end the misery.
I said, "What difference would it make? What good could I have done?
There are too many people."
He said, "No, there's only one."

"One hungry child, the one you did not feed;
One lonely soul, the one you did not heed;
One dying heart, the heart that would not bleed;
For all the things the day has left undone,
You can change the world with only one.

"Now lately I've begun to fear the turning of the earth.
With every lap around the solar system since my birth,
I've seen my chance to change my life go from slim to none.
"How many days are left?" I asked.
He said, "You need just one."

"One single day lived with all your heart
One single step is enough to start
Wonderful things—stuff that's off the chart
Could happen on the journey once begun
You can change your world with only one."

Love has been a guiding principle in my life. God is Love, they taught me; later, God is a verb. So is Love a verb? It's easier to love passively. Love as a verb demands something of us.

Jesus said to love one another, to love our neighbors as ourselves. Over time I have managed to expand my notion of neighbor and love them at least in the abstract. But respect and courtesy seem like more practical goals for daily interactions. In a letter Paul sent to the Colossians, the new Christians in the town of Colossae, he wrote,

"As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, let love guide your life . . . and be thankful."

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You may not be concerned about whether the Lord has forgiven you. The greater need is for individuals to work through their disagreements and come to the peace of forgiveness. Go to the mountaintop of the world and look down. You will find cruelty, fear and hatred, bitter prejudice and warfare.

You will see devastation on the Gulf Coast—hundreds dead after two hurricanes; Guatemala—mudslides; Pakistan and Kashmir—40,000 dead from an earthquake; Niger—40,000 dead from drought-induced famine; Darfur—countless dead; hundreds of thousands now homeless around the world and dispersed far from home.

Knowing all this does two things for me. It reminds me that my own difficulty in living a life of love is nothing compared with a struggle for survival. It also compels me to consider: How can love for humanity in the abstract translate into love for my neighbor? How can love guide my life?

By imagining myself in the shoes of someone whose family was buried alive, I can continue to give to trusted organizations and to try one small deed at a time if I am physically unable to do more.. I can also recognize our common humanity, and the need to work for a world where fear and distrust do not throw up a sandstorm that prevents love and respect from forming. Mark Morford, who writes for the San Francisco Chronicle, had these suggestions in the face of the world's tragedies:

"Personally, I suggest balance, a little bit of everything. Stay informed, read like mad, feel the world deeply . . . Study the news intently and donate money to charities and volunteer when you can and, if nothing else, quite literally hunker down and pray your [head] off . . ."

Some of us can do a lot, but all of us can do a little, listening to our children and their dreams, being there for a stranger who doesn't need more than a smile, remembering the widow's mite, that was all she had to give and for which she was blessed.

How can we embrace one another through life's challenges? We can observe ourselves from time to time with a hawk's eye view rather than get tangled too deeply in exhausting details. Remember that who you are, deep down, is the true blessing you bring to each other. This journey will never end even after our own passing. May we all be more like newlyweds or new mothers and fathers, by discovering great truths with joy in our hearts. May we all become companions on this long and winding journey to love.

Amen