

“The Greatest of These Is Love”
A sermon by the Rev. Roger Bertschausen
preached at the Unitarian Church in Deva, Transylvania
Fox Valley Unitarian Universalist Fellowship
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Lesson 1 – 28:10-17

Jacob set out from Beersheba and went on his way towards Harran. He came to a certain place and stopped there for the night, because the sun had set; and taking one of the stones there, he made it a pillow for his head and lay down to sleep. He dreamt that he saw a ladder, which rested on the ground with its top reaching to heaven, and angels of God were going up and down upon it. The Lord was standing beside him and said, “I am the Lord the God of your ancestor Abraham and the God of Isaac. This land on which you are lying I will give to you and your descendants. They shall be countless as the dust upon the earth, and you shall spread far and wide, to the north and south, to east and west. All the families of the earth shall pray to be blessed as you and your descendants are blessed. I will be with you, and I will protect you where you go and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done all that have promised.” Jacob woke from his sleep and said, “Truly the Lord is in this place, and I did not know it.” Then he was afraid and said, “How awesome is this place! This is no other than the house of God, this is the gate of heaven.”

Lesson 2 - Corinthians 13:1-13

Paul teaches the Corinthians that love is the greatest gift

If I speak in human tongues or the tongues of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give away all I have, and if I deliver my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing.

Love is patient and kind, love is not jealous or boastful, it is not arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way, it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrong, but rejoices in the right. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Love never ends, as for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away. For our knowledge is imperfect and our prophecy is imperfect; but when the perfect comes, the imperfect will pass away. When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I gave up childish ways. For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part, then I shall understand fully, even as I have been fully understood. So faith, hope, love abide, these three: but the greatest of these is love.

Sermon

For years you dreamt about having a church building of your own. Then you poured your hearts and your souls into bringing that dream alive by transforming this

place into a spiritual home. You poured into this building your time, your energy and your money. It has been an honor to my congregation to be able to offer a little support as you turned your dreams into this beautiful reality. All of your dreams and hard work culminated yesterday with the dedication ceremony. It was a culmination of so much effort by so many people.

And of course it was much more of a beginning than an ending. For many, many years to come, you will gather here in this sacred place to give thanks in times of joy and to pray for strength and guidance in times of challenge. Here you will gather to dedicate your babies. Here you will gather to witness the marriage ceremonies of people you love. And here you will gather to bid a fond farewell to loved ones who have died. In this space, you will contemplate the dreams you have for your lives. You will consider how best to walk through the struggles and challenges and disappointments as well as the joys that life inevitably offers each of us. Here you will come to create meaning, to find support and, when you need it, challenge. Here is where you will come to find community.

And in this sacred place, Unitarian pilgrims from all over the world will gather in worship. So close to the hallowed ground where Francis David died for our faith, pilgrims will find within these walls hospitality, solace and inspiration. You have generously built a spiritual home not just for yourselves, but for Unitarians from near and far.

Surely, then, God is in this place. God will always be in this place. This is sacred ground. This is no other than the house of God. How awesome is this place!

And how will you know that God is in this place? I think you will know this best when you see and feel love in this place. Ultimately it is the love you share here with one another and with the world beyond these walls that matters. Not the building—the building, as wonderful as it is, is simply a vehicle to help you better embody love in the life of this community and in your lives.

In the words of the Rev. Jozsef Szombatfalvi, it is “love that fills the universe, and holds us together. For Love ultimately is of God.”¹ I think this is the single most profound truth shared by Jesus: God is love. The great mission of the church is not just to proclaim this truth, but to live it. And how do we live the truth that God is love? By loving not just our family and friends and fellow church members, but also by loving strangers and even our enemies. Love: this is the great mission of the church.

Of course loving each other is not always easy. But we have to start somewhere, so why not start within our churches? In his letter to the Corinthians, Paul lifts up the importance of loving one another in our churches. In the United States, we often read these words from Paul in our wedding ceremonies. But Paul really wrote these words not for couples getting married, but for a church. These are his instructions to the church in Corinth, a congregation that was in the midst of many challenges. The Corinthian church was struggling to be a healthy church community in the midst of the challenges of real life. In their struggles, they were no different from you. They were no different from us in our Fellowship. They were like any church. I think of your church, struggling through years of Communist oppression and now the aftermath of Communist rule. I think of my congregation, struggling for life the 1950s in a center of anti-Communist hysteria. Many people in our town irrationally linked Communism and liberal religion. This wasn't

¹ <http://clf.uua.org/quest/2008/11/szombatfalvi.html>.

nearly as intense or as dangerous as your struggles with Communist rule, but isn't it interesting: you struggled with Communism and we struggled with anti-Communism. Today this is not a concern for us, but we have other concerns. Foremost among these is the challenge of growth—our Fellowship has changed enormously as we've grown from 100 adult members to 600. Change is hard in a religious community—no doubt it was hard for the Corinthians, too, and for you.

In his letter, Paul appeals to the Corinthians to find agreement and to avoid divisions, to be firmly joined in the unity of mind and thought. He has some very simple, concrete suggestions for how to do this. To be loving, he tells the Corinthians, you need to avoid boasting. You need to avoid feeling jealous. And you need to avoid arrogance, rudeness, resentment, and irritability. All of these things get in the way of loving. Instead, Paul counsels, be kind to one another. Listen to one another. Respect one another. This is how to bring love alive in our churches. This is how to make room for God in our churches so that they truly become houses of God.

Every congregation struggles with how to be loving. This is why Paul's letter to the Corinthians is still so beautiful and so relevant: it names the problems and the promise of every religious community everywhere.

I certainly know that my congregation has struggled with this. We have had our moments of arrogance and rudeness and resentment and jealousy and irritability. At times, these behaviors have threatened the very existence of my congregation. Several years ago we adopted a set of principles that helps us avoid these behaviors. These principles remind us of what we each must do to make our congregation truly an embodiment of God's love. Among other things, these principles remind us:

- To listen carefully to one another.
- To keep our individual needs in balance with the health and vitality of the community as a whole.
- To welcome dialogue and even disagreement.
- To be open, courteous, honest, respectful and forgiving with each other.
- To respect tradition and also to embrace change as the needs of our community change.
- To be honest and straightforward with one another.

All of these principles are variations of Paul's instructions to the Corinthians. They, like Paul's letter, remind us how we ought to behave in our Fellowship. Striving to abide by these principles—this is how we can do our part to bring love alive in our congregation. It's what we can do to make room for God in our congregation and in our hearts.

I think that this same sort of love lies at the heart of the relationship of our two congregations. Loving one another is the point of our partnership. This is why it is such a joy to be with you today and the other occasions our pilgrims have visited Deva. It's why we were so joyful to welcome first Laszlo and Matilda and Anna Kiss and then Zoltan and Ildiko Koppandi to our Fellowship. It's why we look forward one day (soon, we hope) to welcoming some of the members of your church to our Fellowship. These visits are tangible symbols of the great love that together we have kindled between our two congregations.

And there is one more thing I want to lift up about love. It is mutual. True love is always a two-way street, never a one-way street. In a truly loving relationship, both

partners give and receive. Both sacrifice for and benefit from the relationship. Oh, it's not always an exactly even trade, but over time it evens out.

This is certainly true of the partnership between our two congregations. You have given us so much over this past decade. One very significant gift you have given us is a much stronger connection to the Unitarian tradition. Frankly our congregation had been on the periphery of Unitarian Universalism—the nearest UU congregations when I came to Appleton eighteen years ago were two hours away. In spite of the help we received at a few key junctures, we had a self-image as an independent, self-directed congregation, bravely staking out a claim for religious liberalism in a conservative part of our state. Our sense of being part of a larger movement—with a long history stretching far back before our Fellowship's founding in 1955—was quite minimal.

So how lucky for us to be matched with you, the Unitarian church in one of the most historic spots on earth for our faith! The most powerful experience for many of us who have made the pilgrimage to Deva is the hike up to the citadel. To be in the place where arguably the most important person in Unitarian history died is such a deeply moving experience. All of us who have made the pilgrimage—and the many folks in our congregation who have heard our stories of visiting David's prison cell—now have a far richer understanding of just how deep our Unitarian roots are.

We also didn't appreciate our own congregation's roots enough. There were some of our founding members, for example, whose stories were not widely known among us. One such founder was named Christine Wise Morgan. I had heard some vague stories that she had once been married to a Transylvanian minister. But even after participating in a memorial service for her, I didn't really understand or appreciate her Transylvanian connection.

Just before we entered into our partnership with your church, I read a book of Christine's remembrances of her years in Transylvania which was published after her death. Her first husband was Balazs Ferens, a Transylvanian Unitarian minister whom she met in the 1920s in California, where they were both studying. They fell madly in love. After Ferens returned to Transylvania, Christine traveled by herself through the Orient to marry her lover (not exactly a common journey for a young woman in the 1920s). Ferens and Christine dedicated their lives to strengthening their small village church and making their little corner of the world more just and peaceful. Tragically both contracted tuberculosis. Christine eventually recovered, but Ferens died of the disease after a long battle. Christine and their little girl then returned to the United States. Through many twists and turns Christine ended up in Appleton, where she joined eight others in founding my Fellowship. Connecting with you has helped my congregation learn and appreciate Christine's story.

But of course a connection with our UU and congregation's past is not the only gift we've received in our partnership. Each one of us who has made the pilgrimage to Deva has been transformed by the experience. For example, there's one couple that made the pilgrimage here a few years ago. They had been married about a dozen years and had concluded long ago that they didn't want to have children. While they were here, something happened that caused them to rethink this—especially the blessing they received from one of the elders in your congregation. In spite of not speaking a common language, they could tell the blessing involved a child (probably the elder's touching the

woman's stomach indicated this!). Their son Liam was born about nine months after their pilgrimage to Deva.

But the most significant gift of our partnership is friendship. Incredibly deep friendships have been kindled. I am so grateful for my friendships with the Kiss family and with the Koppandi family and with so many of you! And then there were the heartfelt condolences and prayers we received from you after the horrible terrorist attacks on our country in 2001. Stunned and grieving as all Americans were in that tragic moment, it meant a great deal to feel your love and concern.

And hopefully we've been able to return some of the love back to you over this past decade. I love the sign for "giving" in American sign language. It is exactly the opposite of what you'd expect: rather than extending my arms toward you as if I am bearing gifts for you, I pull my extended arms back toward me. You would think this would be the sign for receiving, not for giving. But here's the profound message of the sign: when we give, we often receive far more than we give. And so when we've given our support to you, we have received far more in return. For this and for our partnership over this past decade and over many decades to come, I am most grateful.

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