

Love will guide us... it's the title & first line of one my most favorite hymns. It's the hymn we sang as our opening song this morning. It's the title I've given to this sermon. Whenever we sing it in church, later in the day & for the rest of the week, I invariably sing it in my car, and on walks, and while I'm standing at the counter in my kitchen preparing dinner. Given a choice, I'm pretty sure Dan prefers my singing this hymn to my singing the latest pop song that regularly take residence in my head. Personally, I *like* singing it (even to myself) mostly because of what it says, and what it suggests, and how it reminds me to pay attention to how I am actually living my life...

Love will guide us, peace has tried us, hope inside us, will lead the way.
On the road from greed to giving, love will guide us through the hard night.

Love will guide us... it's like a mantra; some hopeful possibility and promise, an orientation of the heart to the world that I know to want to hang onto; it's the kind of message we seek to remind each other of in this very church community; *love will guide us* is a call to action in song, an encouragement to each of us to let it be love, or yet better said, to choose for it to be love that guides us; love that leads us in our daily affairs at work, at home, with our neighbors and our loved ones, with strangers, and *yes*, even with the person in our life, in this moment, who seems to know exactly what to do, or say, to most readily push our buttons, making us—as if that's really true—but we say making us, be ugly, or unkind, dismissive, or sometimes, even cruel.

I stand before you on this Sunday before Valentine's Day, knowing I am capable & guilty of doing such things, and of being that kind of person at moments in my life. By virtue of our human nature, and the influences of our respective life experiences and personalities and brain chemistries, we are each capable of being and acting in ways that we are proud of, as well as those that we are not. To think or believe that we are otherwise, is in my mind, on some level to want to delude ourselves, and to evade an important truth that we cannot really afford to ignore. Precisely because we are not ever perfect, or enlightened, or infallible in all things, part of our spiritual work—however messy and painful it may be at times—is to see when and where we falter, and to remember together that we aspire to hear & heed a certain call: A call to honor the promises we make to each other, and to the holy among & within us however we're inclined to describe such a presence; a call we make to commit ourselves, and to be willing to do so again and again, as we strive to *live* our lives guided by love.

But what do you mean by *love*, some one here must be wondering? And really, it's a good and fair question and one that deserves to be thoughtfully considered and answered. Love, after all, is a word nowadays that we're all too quick to throw around. The kind of love I'm speaking of; love as a guide to be called back to, as an ethic of right-relationship and livelihood and speech, this is *not* a sentimental kind of love, or only surface deep. It is not solely self-concerned or at all narrowly focused. It does not *ever* masquerade as sappy or saccharine, or sweetness and light only, or the insincere habits we sometimes hide behind when we choose only to be very, very nice in each and every situation when something else, some thing more real and more radical is needed.

Instead, the love that all great spiritual teachers, poets and prophets across the ages call us to live by is a muscle-y kind of love. It has a strength, and depth, and reach *through* us that inspires courage and caring; a wakefulness and respect for our relatedness and dependence on each other; a sense of responsibility we feel in wanting and trying to be and act as *mensch*; as humane, and humble, as concerned for the well-being of all.

This kind of love is what the Ancient Greeks first called *agape*, one of four classical kinds of love that they identified, the three other being *eros*, the basis for the word erotic, meaning love that is desire, and usually associated with sexuality; *philia*, the basis for the word family, meaning love based on blood relationship or a group; and *caritas*, love of all people.

Agape, as the Greeks understood it, and it has come down to us through the ages, is a selfless kind of love; a love for the universe; a love that transcends reason, and desires good not only for all humanity, but for *all* living beings, and for the earth itself. *Agape* is the kind and quality of loving that exists without possessiveness, without self-interest, without limit.

In thinking about *this* kind of love, I can't help but to call to mind again a piece of the story Karen shared with us as part of her personal reflection about her recent trip to a sister city in El Salvador, a place she's visited many times over these last twenty years. This year, she told us, she met Celina, now a grown woman, someone living and working as a town leader in a village where she's trying to start a health clinic, trying and wanting to be a part of helping other women and children in need in her country.

Adelante, we're told also, is the word her mother Lara Lopez said to her, that fateful day, twenty-six years ago now. *Adelante*, she said, as she threw Celina her backpack, full of supplies and medicine; full of the only stuff she had left to give her in that moment, as she watched her then 12 year-old daughter run for safety, away from the devastating scene of her own demise, a victim of that country's brutal Civil War, a war that our government dollars helped fan & fuel those many years.

Adelante – go forward, is what it means. Keep going, know that I love you, that this charge, this last little bit of my direction and guidance for you, my child, is this: Be alive in this world. Live in it, that it might become a better place. Believe that you have all of what it takes to do this; to live with this great and tragic sadness of your mother's death and all you likely will endure, and still, let it be LOVE that guides you—*my* love, God's love, the very love of creation herself, a love capable of grounding you, and helping you through this dark night of the soul; a love that beckons & urges you into the possibility and promise of a *new* life; never again an easy or naïve life; never again wholly without shades of the great sadness you've experienced, but a life nevertheless, that is worth-while; a life that encourages you to dare to believe again that not everyone or everything is lost or bad or over.

What ever happen, writes the poet Wendell Berry, *those who have learned to love one another have made their way to the lasting world and will not leave, whatever happens.*

Lara Lopez's love for her daughter stops me in my tracks. It takes my breath away. Her daughter, *Celina's* love, the strength she's found to work and live and continue striving to help others, to be a force for justice in *spite* of all she has suffered, is awe inspiring.

To hear this story, to sit with its truth, to imagine what it might long to tell us about this world and the violence we are capable of; to really take in what happened, knowing, too, that so many others have known such cruelty, such brutality and pain, to do this, is also in a way to begin to see again with greater perspective and insight what love really *is*; the strength it can wield, the hardship it can endure, and the power it can have in our lives to help us transform the pain and grief and tragedy we have known into a passion for justice and righteousness; for risk-taking in spite of fear; for saying and doing as another poet Adrienne Rich does when she writes, *My heart is moved by all I cannot save: so much has been destroyed. [Still, I] cast my lot with those, who age after age, perversely, with no extraordinary power [seek to]reconstitute the world.*

This kind of love is what's called for in the great commandments we've been handed down by the prophets of the Old Testament, and by Jesus and Buddha, by Gandhi and Dr. King. It's a depth of seeing and commitment that calls us to love our neighbors as ourselves, and to love our enemies, too. To abide in God's love, to know in our bones, that Her's is a love that's not selfish, jealous or proud; a love *not* concerned with having power over another, or revenge, or fear that stifles living of any kind; it is, rather, a love that never fails us, that is with us *through* all manner of things, that is patient and kind, that rejoices with truth; a love that seeks always to protect and trust, and to help us to reach for hope and to persevere. *It is power at its best, as Dr. King said, power implementing the demands of justice, and justice at its best, is power correcting everything that stands against love.*

In the public realm, to live a life guided by such a love is to rejoice in some of the news we've heard just this past week. News that the U.S. 9th Circuit of Appeals upheld a lower court decision which declared unconstitutional California's controversial Proposition 8, banning marriage between same-gender couples by popular vote. The news, too, that Washington State's legislature just passed a marriage bill, and sent it to their supportive governor, Chris Gregoire, for her signature.

To live a life guided by love, is to choose to work & celebrate with folks from Equality Maine and the many other GLBTQ advocacy groups that collected & delivered to Augusta *well over* the number of signatures required to get a People's Vote on the ballot re: Marriage Equality in November. It's knowing and having worked for, and now celebrating the news that the Maine state legislature has finally passed a bill that seeks to address the devastating reality of bullying in our schools. A depth and strength of love that calls us to celebrate these things, and to see, too, where there is still so much that is yet to be done; where suffering and injustices continue to rule; to allow ourselves to feel the sadness and despair of others, to embody compassion, and to hold to our own center, born of connection with others, that seat and power within where love resides.

If there's an *easy* way to live our lives according to this kind & quality of love, I've not yet found it, and in truth, I do not believe it exists. Love that is transformative in our lives and the world does and will always require a great deal from us. And so, ours is and becomes the *spiritual* work—by which I mean the transformational work that we must each undertake—in order to cultivate and create a true and deeply rooted capacity within us to love.

We will make mistakes. We will lose our way. We will wish we had done something, or said (or not said) something differently. All of this is true, and still, there is much to celebrate and grateful thanks to give, and a sacred call we seek to hear, beckoning us forward to make love real and our lives worth living.

May love as *agape* be known and felt in you, this day & Valentine's Day, and always.
May the Spirit of Love live & breathe inside you, a part of that deeply rooted center within that we seek to nurture. May this be true, in you life and in mine.

Blessed be.