

IT'S ABOUT LOVE, DAMN IT!

A sermon preached by the Rev John Nichols to the First Parish of Wayland, Ma.
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I had a vision the other day while I was driving to Cape Cod. An apparition suddenly appeared in the passenger seat next to me. It was a young man immaculately dressed like a salesman. After I regained control of the car, he said, "John, we're going to make you a deal." "Well," I said, "Who are you and where are you from?" The specter replied, "I work for Infernal Enterprises Inc. We specialize in personal transformations." I said, "What kind of deal?" He said, "John, we like you. We really do. So this is the deal we are going to make. We're going to take your soul and put it into the body you had when you were twenty-five. Now how's that sound?"

I must have stuttered and stammered, because the apparition quickly said, "Look, maybe this is a little sudden. We'll make you an even better deal. We'll make some improvements on your previous twenty-five year old body." There was a twinkle in his eye. He was beginning to remind me of the guy who sold me my first Toyota.

He said, "We'll add a couple of inches to your height." He paused waiting for a reaction. Apparently there was one, because he went on a little further. "We'll add a deeper shade of blue to those eyes." He paused. I was silent thinking it over. "And, he said," You're going to love this. We'll give you one of those real deep stained glass voices that parishioners love to hear. And we'll give you bionic legs so that you'll be able to leap tall mountains in a single bound, and – here's the clincher – your body will never grow old again."

"Well, what about my wife," I asked, "I don't know if she's going to appreciate my running around looking like a young man." He said, "No problem. We'll do the same thing for her."

"Look, what's the catch?" I said skeptically. "No catch" he said, "We just really like you, but you have to decide in thirty minutes or the deal's off." I said, "Is this sort of like what they called a Faustian bargain?" He replied, "Faust was a jerk. You, we like. You have thirty minutes to decide." And he vanished.

I thought about it long and hard. Forty years ago I was in pretty good shape. No extra weight – in fact I was a little skinny. I could eat with impunity. I had all my hair. Add to that a couple of extra inches, deep blue eyes, stained glass voice, and physical immortality. I could cut a pretty svelte figure in clergy circles. It seemed not such a bad deal to have the accumulated wisdom of sixty-eight years in a twenty-five year old body. Nancy and I could go back to being what older folks speak of as an "interesting young couple instead of weary veterans of forty years of marriage and child raising.

I finally realized what the problem was. My Sixty eight year old soul would not be comfortable in my Twenty-Five year old body. At twenty-five I was driven by anxiety and ambition. I was fixed at becoming the bright new kid on the ministerial block. I was convinced that the key to that was putting in a sixty-hour week. I also believed in a lot of “oughts” and “shoulds” that no longer seem important, and some “oughts” I then thought unimportant now seem very important.

I was like the young minister who gave as one of his first sermons something like “Ten Rules for the Raising of Children.” Ten years later as the father of two actual children the minister preached “Ten Thoughts for Raising Children.” And ten years later when he had moved his family, including two adolescents, to a new parish he preached on the topic, “Forgiveness for Parents.”

As we grow older we become aware of limitations. As we know our own limitations we can see others are living with theirs as well. I have become more compassionate though sometimes not as much as I would like to be. As aches and pains take their toll on activities that once came easily I become more aware that others have their losses, their grief, their regrets, and I am more able to celebrate the courage with which we all live. No. My twenty-five year old body would not understand my sixty eight year old self. I’m afraid they just wouldn’t get along.

Nowhere would this be more true than in how I feel about love – then and now. At twenty-five I thought that love was all about what happened to me. I imagined bells, whistles, rockets going off, a nice syrupy, warm relationship.

As Time magazine wrote once, “Love’s symptoms are familiar enough: a drifting mooniness in thought and behavior, the mad conceit that the entire universe has rolled itself up into the person of the beloved, a conviction that no one on earth has ever felt so torrentially about a fellow creature before. Love is ecstasy and torment, freedom and slavery. Poets and songwriters would be in a fine mess without it. Plus it makes the world go round.” That’s the way I felt.

As we grow older we discover that a truly loving relationship must be something quite different from what I thought. It must be reciprocal and it must have some commitment to it or it becomes infatuation on one or both sides. Love actually is real. It’s a relationship that is grows between people or it is not love at all.

But it is hard to make sense of a word that is used in so many different ways. For example compare: I love lasagna. I love the Red Sox. I love my country. I love Beethoven. I love my wife, Nancy. I love hiking. I love most of the congregations I’ve served (although there have been individuals I haven’t always

liked.) I love singing hymns. I love my children and grandchildren. I love a good red wine. I love summer.

I have several UU colleagues who have started to end their sermons with the words, "I love you." What can that possibly mean? Does the minister love all members of his congregation just as he loves his family? I would hope not. Or is it some sort of generalized, non-specific love that you really ought not to count on.

When in another congregation my music director finally badgered me into preaching on love, because she had purchased all of these anthems about it, and because it's February. I agreed but reluctantly. Hence the title you see. But since I said I would preach on love, I have decided to talk about the only human love that makes sense to me, and that is the love that takes place within a committed relationship. I think it has five characteristics.

#1. A loving relationship requires that we remain open to the mystery of what we do not see or what we do not yet understand about the other. Each person we come to know well remains partially a mystery to us, and that is a blessing. The moment we think we understand someone else fully, we begin to take him/her for granted. It then becomes easier for us to abuse that person.

Learning that another person has thoughts and dreams, an emotional history we will never finally know; learning that this person has hidden strengths even she/he does not know and insights which are still forming, we grow in our capacity to be surprised and humbled by the people we cherish. Part of the joy of living in any relationship is watching the mystery of another person unfold.

One high school health textbook I've heard about encourages young people to have a "life long romance" with themselves. Actually that's the description many people give me of their first husband, wife or partner. "He had a life long romance with himself." But in a solid committed relationship, two people explore the wonder of each other and never entirely understand every thing there is to know. That is my first point.

#2. Living in a truly loving relationship is having the chance to experience more of life than any one of us can live alone. This is one of the reasons why people of opposite personalities and dispositions tend, often unconsciously, to attract one another into loving relationships. We wonder why it happens, of course, when two opposites enter into a relationship. What could they see in one another? They are so different. That is precisely the point.

We are aware – or if not we should be – of how very incomplete we are. How little we understand from our one very isolated point of view. We look to those we love to bring a new angle of vision into our lives, a new learning style, a

new way of ordering the world and making decisions. Through a loving relationship we effectively live a fuller life than we could alone.

#3. Competition happens even among the most loving. You can't suppress it even among friends. You can't eliminate it among siblings. But persistent competition is also antithetical to a loving relationship. We inevitably discover that those we love are better at some things than we are. That was actually why the relationship blossomed into love. So part of the work of maintaining that relationship is learning to let go and enjoy not having to be first.

#4. In a solid loving relationship the emotional weather between two people will change. They themselves will change it, and they will change each other. We should not be afraid to allow this to happen or alarmed when we discover that it has happened. Just what makes this change happen will always be a partial mystery, and so it is not wise to try too hard to change a person you love.

In fact, nearly all advice-giving columnists agree with me. Never enter into a committed relationship with a person thinking that you can change something in that person which you do not like. By consciously trying too hard you probably won't change anything, and the truth is that as two people spend a life together they will change each other in ways neither expected.

The chemistry between two people in a loving relationship is unique. When two people love each other for awhile there is a constant shifting and give and take concerning who does what and who makes what kinds of decisions. The strength that we get from our partner makes it possible for us to be stronger in other areas of our lives than we ever thought we could be. It is better to accept the mystery of how this happens and never try to make it happen.

#5. Mistakes will be made in any loving relationship. Some of them we make blindly. Other mistakes we will make and recognize within an instant that we have done something hurtful. And there are mistakes we need to think about carefully to understand why we keep making them. There are also mistakes that amount to serious abuse and have to be stopped immediately or there is no loving relationship. So mistakes will be made. We can count on it.

Thus, there can be no love without forgiveness. It just isn't possible, because we cannot get up in the morning every day wondering if a single mistake or even two mistakes will ruin the relationship that we have worked so hard to build. We need to know that we have been forgiven, because we are loved and because we try very hard to understand how we are most likely to mess up and how we can avoid doing that again.

On the other hand being forgiving does not mean that we constantly court disappointment and hurt. Between two people there is a bridge called

understanding. When two people have made an effort to cross that bridge often enough – each moving toward the other from his/her own side – they clearly deserve to be forgiven their occasional failure. Where there is no effort made to cross that bridge from one side or the other or from both, then there is no real forgiveness. Forgiveness between two people who know each other well requires mutual effort and when that effort is lacking there is neither forgiveness nor love.

So then these are my signs of a loving relationship.

1. Each is open to the mystery of the other so that each can learn how many depths, beyond depths there are in each of us.
2. Each experiences more of life together with his/her beloved than either could ever experience alone.
3. The competitive instinct is not allowed to spoil the relationship.
4. Two people are changed in ways they never expected but they learn it is not possible to make that happen. It has to be allowed to happen.
5. Such a loving relationship between two people in which each has come to realize that he/she is no prize to live with but in which each becomes very dear to the other is one of the most beautiful and sustaining experiences on the earth.