"Transforming Love"

A sermon delivered online by the Rev. Dr. Stephanie May
for the First Parish in Wayland, MA
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Part of a series that explores the covenant of the First Parish in Wayland:
"In the search for truth in freedom and in the spirit of love,
we unite for worship, community, and service."

I was 12 when I first kissed someone. Not the kind of kisses my parents or grandparents or some random person at church planted upon me. But, a *real* kiss. A kiss with someone who made my chest tighten and my stomach squirm. A kiss that I wanted, but wasn't sure would come. A kiss that felt both entirely welcome and delightfully surprising all at once.

Some years later, I found myself as a young woman listening to the story another woman's first kiss. Weeks before I had graduated from college, an evangelical Christian school that had begun to feel intellectually and spiritually confining. In search of a bit of freedom and adventure, I volunteered at Holden Village, a progressive Christian retreat center in the mountains of Washington State. On my first evening, I decided to attend an evening forum. While I can't recall the exact panel theme, I knew it had something to do with love, sexuality, and relationships. At 21, I was in.

Walking in to a full room, I made my way upstairs to a narrow balcony where I sat looking over the rail to the panelists below. One of the three panelists, Allison, did not appear to be much older than me. I listened closely as Allison began to tell her story. She talked about the awkwardness of dating as a young woman—the first dates and the first kisses and the feeling of not quite understanding the hype about kissing and dating. Initially Allison had been dating young men, but then she met a woman and a connection grew. When she kissed the woman, she said it was *nothing* like kissing boys had been. Smiling as she searched for the words to tell her story, Allison conveyed in her sparkling eyes and long pause how powerful that first kiss with a woman was for her.

Peering over the railing at Allison, my own heart shifted and my life began to change. For years, I had been taught to condemn the "homosexual lifestyle." But, I wanted to root for Allison, for her joy in kissing and feeling the electric delight of intimacy with another. Listening to Allison's story not only transformed my heart, it also marked a turning point in my spiritual journey. I knew that I needed to find an understanding of life and religion that had space for affirming same-sex love and intimacy.

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In a book entitled, *Love*, philosopher of religion Diogenes Allen uses the story of the Rime of the Ancient Mariner to describe his understanding of love. The story begins with the Mariner in high spirits. Having made it through some bad seas, he and the rest of the crew were enjoying a good day. And then, he senselessly shot the very albatross whose flight had helped to guide them. After hanging the dead albatross around the Mariner's neck, all the crew died from hunger and sickness . . . except for the Mariner who lived on with the burden of the albatross around his neck.

Today's reading picks up the story at this point. We find the Mariner peering over the railing of the ship watching water snakes move in the water below. Seeing the beauty in their colors and in their movement, the Mariner delights in their happiness. His indifferent blindness to the value and worth of other living creatures is replaced with the ability to recognize the life of others. As he looks with delight upon the beauty and happiness of other lives, "a spring of love gushed from [his] heart, and [he] blessèd them unaware."

According to Allen, love springs from this capacity to *see* and to respect the inherent beauty and dignity of life—even in the life of a water snake, even in a life that seems to have no merit, no usefulness to one's own life. Indeed, it is too easy to <u>not</u> *see* people. We can walk by the homeless, not even meeting their eye. We can talk on our cell phone as we hand a cashier our money. We can sit at the dinner table without really asking about others. And we can read a newspaper article about another violent death and calmly turn the page with little more than a shake of the head.

This past week saw the violent deaths of three Muslim students in North Carolina—Yusor Mohammad Abu-Salha, Deah Shaddy Barakat, and Razan Mohammad Abu-Salha.
While local law enforcement cite an ongoing parking dispute as a key factor in their deaths, family and friends have called their deaths a hate crime. And, the federal government has opened an inquiry into their deaths and possible civil rights violations. There is much we do not know and may never know about their deaths. And the motives of the suspected killer, Craig Hicks, are inevitably complicated. Yet, it seems relevant to me that Hicks appears to be strongly anti-religious—posting incendiary comments about religion and religious beliefs in social media.

Our congregational covenant that calls us to a "search for truth in freedom and in the spirit of love" takes on a very real significance in this context of religious and anti-religious violence. Our commitment to a free search for truth means that we recognize and expect that there is and will be religious difference and diversity in this world. Committing ourselves to respond *in a spirit of love* means that we will not respond to religious difference, with disdain or indifference, and certainly not with violence.

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As a concrete expression of these commitments, last Thursday the Parish Committee voted to support a statement condemning such violence. The statement reads:

> "The First Parish in Wayland, a Unitarian Universalist congregation, extends its support to the Islamic Center of Boston and the American Muslim community of Greater Boston in condemning violence conducted under the guise of religious faith and anti-religious bigotry. We pledge to work with all faith communities to forge bonds of respect and tolerance as well as to address issues of justice and peace in our world."

Difference should not be met with hatred, nor with violence. Rather, we are called to be people of love. We are called to a love that recognizes the otherness of a person—even if person may be very different than us, with clothing that may seem strange or whose ways of life . . . and religion . . .may seem "foreign."

To recognize the otherness of a person is *not* the same as saying that you must agree, accept, or even condone everything that a person does or believes. I certainly hope that we do not condone the actions of any person who thoughtlessly, indifferently takes the life of another—whether it be a mariner killing an albatross, a police officer killing a 12-year old boy, or a neighbor shooting his neighbors over a parking dispute.

But, the recognition of otherness does mean that we *see* the person, that we *see* the life in all of its beauty—as well as in its brokenness, its pain, and even in its horror. To *see* another, to *recognize* an-other in this way is to love. Failure to see is a failure of love. As Elie Weisel has written,"the opposite of love is not hate, it's indifference."

The world is a big place with a lot of people and a lot of lives. To feel alone in seeing and recognizing all of this beauty and all of this pain would be overwhelming—which is why I think Diogenes Allen misses something in his definition of love as the recognition of otherness. I think love might be better understood as the recognition of *togetherness.* Yes, to truly recognize a sense of togetherness, there must still be a recognition of otherness. We all need to realize that more than just one's own self matters, that there is me and you and a whole plurality of people in all of their differences and diversity.

But the recognition of togetherness goes farther by also recognizing the bonds between and among us: that I see you *and* you see me; that we are not isolated creatures swimming in our own waters, but that we are in relationships that link our lives one to another in small and in global ways.

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Over this Valentine Weekend, many people have celebrated the ways in which their lives *are* linked in togetherness with others. Such gifts of romantic love and first kisses are often key ways that many learn what it feels like to really see and care for another beyond oneself. There are also many other kinds of relationships of connection and care through which we can learn to *see* and to *love*: friends and family, co-workers and congregations, neighbors and even strangers.

We live within whole constellations of relationships.
We live within webs of togetherness.

Recognizing this togetherness can *transform* lives. Such clear-sighted recognition of togetherness seeks to honor the dignity of life—whether to celebrate its beauty or to grieve its brokenness. We are called to be people who respond to others with an openness to hear their story, to risk being transformed by seeing another life . . . even in its difference, even in its strangeness.

May we indeed seek to be people who live *in a spirit of love*—in all of its manifold expressions.

So may it be. Amen.

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