

“Equity in Love”

A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Stephanie May

First Parish in Wayland

February 14, 2021

How many of you have engaged in the ritual of making a Valentine mailbox for an elementary school classroom? I remember carefully decorating shoe boxes with colorful construction paper, making a slit for “mail” in the top. Then, I would carefully sort the little store-bought kit of cards into ones I decided were ‘better’ and ‘not as good’. Following the class list provided by the teacher—*so no one would be left out!*—I gave the ‘better’ ones to my friends and the ‘not as good’ ones to everyone else. Am I the only one?!

How is it that small kids learn to divide and rank people? On the one hand, an argument could be made that the rankings I gave were relative to the degrees of closeness I felt to kids, a pretty innocuous and rather understandable sorting. On the other hand, I also remember feeling hateful towards a girl that bullied me and wondering if I *had* to give her a card at all?!? In this small way, I was beginning to devalue some people. And, thanks to that bully, I was also learning what it felt like to be devalued.

Valentine’s Day does not necessarily get any easier as we grow up. There may be some magical years when a sweetheart bathes you in love. But perhaps like me, you have also known years of feeling on the outside of a holiday meant to celebrate a love that seemed out of reach or even undesirable. Now, as an adult in a long-term relationship, some years we celebrate and, well, others go by with less fanfare.

As Unitarian Universalists, we like to talk about love. Unlike more conservative religious traditions, I notice that Unitarian Universalists do not talk as often about marital and familial love. Rather, it seems that Unitarian Universalists are more likely to talk about love in terms of social justice—a love that is inclusive of all persons and seeks public justice. To this end, you may have heard the quote by philosopher Cornel West who said, “Never forget that justice is what love looks like in public.” In other words, *loving* your neighbor often means supporting *just and equitable* public policies that ensure kids do not go hungry, housing is affordable, and black and brown lives are not devalued as lesser in the public square.

Since today is Valentine’s Day, a holiday that lifts up intimate love between spouses, partners, and sweethearts—as well as between good friends and other close relationships—I want to consider the converse of West’s statement. If justice is what love looks like in public, then in what ways is love what justice looks like in private? In what ways might we understand *love* in our close relationships as an expression of our values of equity and justice in human relations.

In psychology, there is an equity theory of love which explores the role of equity in close relationships. As I understand it, the [equity theory of love](#) suggests we *do* need more than love to foster healthy relationships—no matter what the Beatles once sang. We also need to

feel a sense of parity in reciprocal caring. To sustain a long, healthy relationship, the equity theory suggests, we desire a sense of fairness in our interactions.

When considering the equity theory of love, it's important to consider how equity and equality are not the same. As the website [Mental Floss](#) sums it up: "equality is about dividing resources in matching amounts, and equity focuses more on dividing resources proportionally to achieve a fair outcome for those involved." This distinction is important in intimate relationships that are often bear complex dynamics between two very different people.

As the song we heard earlier, "Let's Call the Whole Thing Off," playfully names, differences can threaten to unsettle relationships. In a relational context marked by differences, attempting to apply equal treatment and responsibilities between two people can be a recipe in disaster. A call instead for equitable dynamics is an effort to recognize how people bring different contributions and different needs to a relationship.

Equity seeks to foster fairness within the particularities of who we are and who we love. This need to acknowledge the particular experiences of people is certainly true when we speak about public equity. As critical race theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw writes, "Treating different things the same can generate as much inequality as treating the same things differently."

I hear wisdom in Crenshaw's quote not only for racial justice work in social structures, but also for how we interact with those closest to us. If your relationship is anything like mine is with my partner Bill, issues of equity pop up with some regularity. For example, a few weeks into the Covid shut-down, we had to reevaluate our previous breakdown of food and kitchen related labor. Suddenly we were eating at home all the time and the housecleaner was not coming by. The kitchen quickly showed the impact of both of these changes! Talking it through, we aimed to divide the labor equitably based on our skills and capacity. Bill has an amazing ability to tackle daily chores so he took on the daily dishes. I operate better in bursts of energy so I took on the deep-cleaning, detailed projects. Last week was the rather unpleasant task of cleaning grease from the stove hood! There are days this pattern shifts—I have some extra time and do the dishes; he sweeps the kitchen floor after finishing the dishes. And there are days when one or the other of us feels *annoyed* at the other for a perceived imbalance in our kitchen dynamic. That renegotiating conversation was not without some emotion...

To endure the shifting dynamics of relationships, columnist David Brooks describes the need for couples to adopt a "[crooked timber](#)" [mentality](#). (See "Rhapsody in Realism," *New York Times*) He draws the idea from philosopher Immanuel Kant who said, "Out of the crooked timber of humanity no straight thing was ever made." For Brooks, a "crooked timber mentality tends to see life as full of ironies." Continuing, Brooks explains,

Marriage is ironic because you are trying to build a pure relationship out of people who are ramshackle and messy. There's an awesome incongruity between the purity

you glimpse in the love and the fact that he leaves used tissues around the house and it drives you crazy.

Often, the sentimentality and glitter of Valentine's Day can dangle images of pure relationships that may speak to an aspect of love, but nonetheless glide over the messiness. Drawing a parallel to politics, Brooks writes,

Great and small enterprises often have two births: first in purity, then in maturity. The idealism of the Declaration of Independence gave way to the cold-eyed balances of the Constitution. Love starts in passion and ends in car pools.

In a very different manner, poet Haki Madhubuti also draws lines between intimate relationships and the politics of nations. Despite a [painful experience as a child](#) watching his mother suffer in relationships with men, Madhubuti himself married and, in his poem, "[The Union of Two](#)," depicts a compelling relationship built on kinship and shared mission. "Marriage is an art," he writes, "Created by the serious, enjoyed by the mature, watered with morning and evening promises."

Such an artful, intentional love emerges from and reflects deep traditions, deep Afrikan traditions, Madhubuti declares. Claiming this tradition of intimate and familial love within a racist, U.S. context that has long devalued African American marriages and families is no small thing. Such a poem reclaims the dignity of black love and black families. It is yet another reminder of the interplay in the public and private, intimate and national in the making and remaking our shared world. We so often learn who we are and how to be in the larger world by the experiences we have in small units of love and relationship. Lessons that stay with us even when we move away as the little girl in our story "[Love](#)" did.

Such intimate relationships of love can be potent—both in the gifts they bring and in the harm they cause. Our opening song by the Beatles, "[If I Fell](#)," showed the tender pain that can remain from a broken heart . . . even as the promise of new love beckons one to risk again. Perhaps we do need a "crooked timber" framework that leaves space for the human frailty that twists and reshapes our living and our loving.

All our living has been twisted around and reshaped by the events of this past year. And yet, even as we are all going through this same pandemic, we are experiencing it so very differently. Some of these differences reflect socio-economic structures of injustice, such as those that leave immigrant families in Chelsea struggling simply to find food. And some of these differences in experience are happening in much more intimate ways between friends, parents and kids, and spouses. One friend lives alone and another struggles to find solitude in a house full of kids doing online school. One spouse remains fully employed and another struggles to maintain hours or meaningful activities. Through it all, our psychological and emotional resilience is tested. While some of us are able to find paths to renewed energies, others struggle, feeling cut off from sources of joy and strength by Covid precautions.

We may be together by all facing the pandemic, but we are different in our experience and our responses. Whatever early ideal we may have held about a purity of togetherness has long been sullied by the daily experience of pandemic life. Adding weight to the pandemic challenges, we have also faced an unprecedented election and transfer of power all while continuing to face an ongoing reckoning with racial injustice in the U.S.. In response, many of us have engaged with political activism in hopes of a better, more inclusive and equitable nation. All of this while still negotiating our close relationships with spouses, partners, friends, and kids. I am left wondering: could there also be times we need to do some intimate activism in our relationships?

What could it mean to each of us that love is what justice looks like in private. In what ways do our values of equity and justice show up in our close relationships? [Marriage researcher John Gottman](#) describes contempt towards a spouse as a strong predictor that the relationship is in trouble. As discussed in last week's [sermon on hatred](#), contempt reflects a disrespect for someone whom you perceive as lesser than you. In contrast, choosing to foster a sense of equity in a relationship cultivates mutual respect . . . even across differences.

Nineteenth-century Unitarian minister and abolitionist Theodore Parker once wrote, "It takes years to marry completely two hearts, even of the most loving and well assorted. A happy wedlock is a long falling in love." Just as building justice in public takes persistent attention, fostering love in our close relationships also takes time and intention. On this Valentine's Day, may we recommit ourselves to equity and love—for our proverbial neighbor . . . and for those closest to us.

So may it be.
Amen.