

Service Delivered by Jane Blackall
at Essex Church, 14th February 2010

Love in Plain Clothes

I want to set the scene for this sermon with a quote from Jacob Needleman. I think it says something that anyone who sits down to write about love (or stands up to speak about it) had better take on board. It's from a book entitled 'Is the meaning of life to be found in love?' He says:

"We divide love and classify it: we discriminate between physical love and spiritual love, between erotic love and personal love, mother love, father love, the love between friends. ...but the truth is that we remain confused by it. Everyone talks about love, but the truth is that our labels are pale efforts to deal with an overwhelming force, as far beyond our control as the wind, the lightning, and the sea. When we are in love, we are in a tornado of forces, and all we can do is try to hold on to our chair."

I almost wonder if I'm including that quote for my own benefit as much as anything (to excuse my own confusion by the time I was finishing this service in the early hours)!

This is perhaps not going to be an entirely standard Valentine's Day sermon... the slightly unconventional picture on the front of your service (a heart-shaped potato) might have given that away already. In the next ten minutes or so, I hope to reflect on some fairly high-faluting ideals about love... and bring them right down to earth to make them more real in the context of our everyday lives.

Along with the potato, on the front of your order of service, is a quote from the author Charlotte Kasl which sums up the message I want to get across to you today. If this is all you take away from the service I'll have done my duty. She says:

"Love is the energy at the centre of all life. Loving ourselves, loving others, and loving God are inseparable, for all life is interconnected and sacred."

I guess this notion is the foundation of not only this sermon but also my own life philosophy. Essentially, it is closely related to the 'golden rule' which turns up in so many religious traditions and cultures around the world, but I am particularly fond of the Christian expression of it... so I'll treat you to a bit of the King James Version seeing as we don't have bible readings all that often! In Mark's Gospel, Jesus is asked what the greatest commandment is, and in response he says:

"The first of all the commandments is, Hear, O Israel; The Lord our God is one Lord: And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength: this is the first commandment. And the second is like, namely this, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. There is none other commandment greater than these."

In Luke's gospel, Jesus follows this with the parable of the Good Samaritan, which illustrates the point (I think) that to love our neighbour means to love all people everywhere... anyone who is in need... and also that loving God and loving our neighbour are just two sides of the same coin. So, to summarise and recap where we've got to so far: Love is the greatest thing, the ultimate good, and there's nothing more important for us to do in life than love ourselves, others, and God (which, as it turns out, are all interconnected and inseparable anyway).

Let's pursue that last point a bit further. Our own personal, direct, worldly experience of love might just allow us to catch a first-hand glimpse of that cosmic truth of 'oneness' which all the mystics keep trying to tell us about. Forming a deep connection (of any sort) with another human being has got to be one of the most significant things we can ever do in our all-too-brief lives. When we fall in love, there can be a great sense of urgency about it all. We do all that we can to maintain and deepen our connection with this 'significant other'. We might behave in ways that seem quite out of character or which suggest that we have taken leave of our senses altogether. In fact, if you're prone to getting a bit carried away – like I am – you might even see your relationship as some kind of mystical union of souls.

If we are lucky enough to know this sort of sense of 'oneness' (or something that approximates to it) with another human being then maybe the closing lines of the Rumi poem ('Entering the Shell') we heard will make some kind of sense to you:

*"Love, a little shell somewhere on the ocean floor, opens its mouth:
You, and I, and we, those imaginary beings, enter that shell as a single sip of seawater."*

To me, this seems such a beautiful statement of the underlying unity of all-that-is. Two lovers might just get a sense of 'oneness' in a relationship - they are as one in that sip of seawater - but at the same time they are just a drop in the mystic ocean. Like we said before, "Loving ourselves, loving others, and loving God are inseparable, for all life is interconnected and sacred." The experience of love can awaken us to the oneness of everything: the underlying unity of all-that-is.

Now: it is one thing to form a deep connection with lovers (or friends, or family, people we - mostly - feel an easy affinity with) but we are really called to go much further than that... (and this is the point at which I start to leave behind the high-faluting mystical pronouncements and bring our manifesto of love back down to earth).

As we just sang in our last hymn, 'Break not the Circle', we are challenged to keep on extending the circle of love just a little further, and a little further, until it embraces all the living (which is almost certainly going to include some people we don't find all that easy to love).

Some years ago I came across a very short quotation which lodged in my head:

"Kindness is love in plain clothes."

To be honest, it turns out I'd misremembered the quotation – in fact it was respect, not kindness, in the original version – but it occurs to me that love is probably going about its undercover business in all number of plain-clothes guises (kindness, respect, caring, compassion, generosity, and so on).

And I suppose this is what the title of today's service is really getting at. On Valentine's Day we are usually reminded of idealised, romantic love... but it seems to me that 99.9% of the work of love in this world - the love that 'makes the world go round' - is of a distinctly plain-clothes variety and has got much more in common with the 'maintenance' described in the poem by U.A. Fanthorpe ('Atlas', which was read earlier in the service).

What does this plain-clothes love look like?

- at home, it might manifest itself in the humblest of ways, in showing extra care and sensitivity for the people we live with.
- in community, it might include looking out for people you barely know, building deeper connections and taking an interest in their well-being.
- in the wider world, it might be expressed by speaking out against injustice, or taking steps to live more sustainably.

All of these things – and much more besides – are the work of love: not particularly sexy or exciting... but it's what life is really all about.

Before I conclude there's just one more thing I would like to share with you... In January I went to see an exhibition by the artist Rob Ryan (who does a lot of beautiful and often rather poignant papercutting works). One of the more unusual items on display was a pendant entitled 'Everything I Love that Lives in My Heart' and there's a picture of it on the slip of card in your order of service [*the pendant contains boxes in which the artist names different things that he loves - you should be able to find a picture online*]. As you can see he mentions his mum and dad – many other boxes are filled with apparently quite mundane things or experiences: 'the sun on my face', 'swimming in the sea', 'playing my records' and the one which really made me smile when I first saw it: 'mashed potato'.

If you turn that piece of card over now, you'll see I've given you another version of the design... slightly wonkily drawn... with the spaces left blank for you to fill in with the people, places, things, experiences that YOU love and that live in YOUR heart. I encourage you to fill in the blanks quickly, instinctively and spontaneously – nobody's going to hold you to this for all time – it's just a snapshot of this very moment and of course you're not obliged to share what you've written BUT it might be fun (and a starting point for connection) if you choose to chat about it over a cup of tea after the service! I did fill one in myself last night and amongst other things I listed: mum and dad, Simon John, Iceland, Adam and Joe (my favourite radio presenters), Ken Livingstone, and my duvet.

I would suggest that everything that we love (even things that initially seem a bit trivial or silly) points to something greater or more universal than itself. I would therefore encourage you to spend a bit of time reflecting on the meaning of the things that come up for you... SO... there's some homework for you!

I'd just like to end now with one more quote taken from a favourite website of mine (www.spiritualityandpractice.com – full of excellent resources – run by Frederic and Mary Ann Brussat):

"Love of self, love of neighbours, and love of God are the foundation stones of the world's religions. Spiralling out from the core of our being, our other loves are also cobblestones on the spiritual path: love of family, of partner, of friends, of community, of animals, of nature, of things, of hobbies, of work. Love is not just something that you fall into, as the romantic songs suggest. Love is a spiritual practice. It is through loving that we experience the love of God."

Amen