

THE LOVE OF GOD...OUR BEST HOPE

On a long, long road trip recently we had Sirius radio incessantly tuned to a station that plays pops from the past. I bet you can guess the song title word that appeared by far the most frequently on the Sirius radio screen in front of us as we traveled. What word would most appear in the titles of our favorite music? LOVE. Although very long, that journey was truly beautiful because it felt totally enfolded in love by the sound track that accompanied us, rather than the contentious commentary that too often fills the airwaves.

On this journey of life as well, the quality that our souls most yearn to find is also love, and where love is God is. While love is the gift of God to us, it is also the house we create together where God resides. From ancient times people like King David wanted to build a house for God, perhaps out of a longing to keep God near, to feel assurance that God is always with us, to know that love is actually with us. Where love is, God is. But this journey of life is so challenging and messy at times that, much as we yearn for love to be the primary motif, we sometimes wonder how it can be so.

Back to the music that accompanies us on the journey of our lives. BBC once released a video that has utterly captivated me, of numerous superb musicians, all sorts of famous instrumentalists and soloists, together performing the old Beach Boys' hit "God Only Knows." I have been obsessed by that video not because of its excellence or even because the Beach Boys and their music backgrounded my life in the 1960's but because the song "God Only Knows" is featured in a movie produced in 2003 that reminds me of you -- people who take care of one another on this journey of life.

"Love Actually" is the name of that movie. It begins with travelers arriving at Heathrow Airport in London, greeted by loved ones whose presence blesses their lives in this journey of life. As we observe the heathbreakingly beautiful reunions of real people -- not actors, at the opening and the closing scenes these are real people reconnecting after journeys apart -- a voiceover sets the theme: "Whenever I get gloomy with the state of the world, I think about the arrivals gate at Heathrow Airport. General opinion's starting to make out that we live in a world of hatred and greed, but I don't see that. It seems to me that love is everywhere. Often, it's not particularly dignified or newsworthy, but it's always there - fathers and sons, mothers and daughters, husbands and wives, partners, boyfriends, girlfriends, old friends. When the planes hit the Twin Towers, as far as I know, none of the phone calls from the people on board were messages of hate or revenge - they were all messages of love. If you look for it, I've got a sneaky feeling you'll find that love actually is all around."

Love actually IS all around. Here is why that movie reminds me of you: my favorite moments working as executive director of the Ministers Council (1995-2008) were when I saw you as unique individuals and separate stories filled with all the loves and losses, all the joys and sorrows, all the struggles and triumphs; yet simultaneously I see you all together as a beautiful collage, the place where God resides, in the love you share. Love actually IS all around.

Time and time again I have seen that love received and passed on, and I know God is here.

The movie "Love Actually" is set around Christmas time and traces all sorts of human stories through the ups and downs of the journey as the characters are driven by the hunger to love and be loved, sometimes failing, sometimes succeeding, always longing for love. The final ending (again as at the very beginning, real people, not actors, greeting one another at Heathrow Airport) – that ending rushes toward the viewer through all sorts of human love relationships underlined with the song's repeated words "God only knows what I'd be without you," resolving into a collage of ever more and more, ever tinier and tinier videos of people showing their love in hugs and kisses, in smiles and tears: across cultures and colors, gay and straight, romantic relationships, kids and parents, grandparents, friends.... at the very end all those images transformed into an all-encompassing heart-shaped collage.

God only knows what I'd be without you. That is what the world needs to consider, to be aware of the collective human need for love and for each other, multiplied over all times and places and relationships. That is what WE need to consider. God only knows what WE would be without each other. We need one another and God resides in our love. To me the big message of the Church is that God lives where human beings love. God is here, in our love.

You see, the best hope of the world is not found in correct theology, it is found in the love expressed through actions, even when and maybe especially when the journey is difficult. Our best hope is that in Jesus Christ we see God as God really is, and through our loving relationships in the name and the way of Jesus Christ God sees us as Christs to one another.

Thomas Merton put it this way: "...I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all these people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another.... It was like waking from a dream of separateness.... I have the immense joy of being human, a member of a race in which God became incarnate.... Then it was as if I suddenly saw the secret beauty of their hearts, the depths of their hearts where neither sin nor desire nor self-knowledge can reach, the core of their reality, the person that each one is in God's eyes. If only they could all see themselves as they really are. If only we could see each other that way all the time. There would be no more war, no more hatred, no more cruelty, no more greed" (*Conjectures of A Guilty Bystander*).

Love IS all around, and we thank God. God only knows what we'd be without US. The message of Christmas is that God's Spirit fills and flows through our togetherness, and we too are called to be Christs to the world.

The Rev. Dr. Kate Harvey Jacobs served in the 1980s on the Ministers Council Senate, Executive Committee, and as editor of Minister Magazine, then as Executive Director of the Ministers Council from 1995 to 2008. Her earlier work included teaching and then pastoring, ultimately at the First Baptist Church in America founded in 1638 by her hero, Roger Williams.