

The Journey of Love – A Pilgrimage

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Is there anything about which more has been said, sung, written, painted, sculpted, or performed than love? And yet, no matter how many the ways we express love, there is something missing when we think we have defined it.

Why? Because we are largely mistaken about what love is. Think back to a toy you wanted when you were a child, and how that one thing would make you happy. Did you have a schoolyard crush that filled your every thought? You thought you needed these to make your life complete. Chances are you discovered it was not what you expected. Love is not what we expect.

Most people keep looking, though, sure that it is out there, chasing what looks like love over and over. Some turn from seeking love to seeking wealth and power (I'm looking at you Alberich and Charles Foster Kane). Others, cynical about the whole idea, douse the pain with drugs or alcohol. Do I sound cynical? We talk of love but honestly regard money as the measure of our worth. Most people get married but half of marriages end in divorce. How many gallons of booze and bottles of pills have been consumed to dull the pain of a life without love, or worse, felt to be unworthy of love?

If all this is true, then many of our problems as individuals and society come from not knowing what love really is, mistaking other things for love which we then find inadequate. But if we knew what love really is we would have better lives.

That is what I am going to do, or at least try. This small book grew from a series of messages I gave as a preacher, but also and most importantly they arose from my own life. I have often given in to self-pity, my lack of professional success as measured by the usual things like growing attendance and new buildings and books published. I wanted them very much, like that toy. Meanwhile, as if they were unimportant, I helped people in their lives, husbanded institutions as they faced challenges, have a strong marriage and wonderful grown children.

But thankfully those lures no longer have their hold on me as much. What I have to offer is not a cure or a revelation. It is wisdom, which means experience learned from, including the unhappy fact that we are imperfect creatures no matter how wise we become. Even when we know what is true we

sometimes prefer an illusion. But when you know the truth that illusion is easier to see and easier to resist.

The truth of love is simple but hard to understand. That means I have to prepare you by clearing away the overgrowth of false loves. In the Christian tradition this is called the *apophatic*, or the *via negativa*. It means discerning what something is *not* as a way to discovering what it is. In what follows I first cover what love is not, though often thought to be. It is perhaps the least 'loving' way to approach love. But we also have to let go of the way we use the word as well as the idea. And besides, if love really is so important, it can withstand the coldest of analyses and the most jaundiced of skeptics.

I began this effort thinking of how long ago Augustine of Hippo did the same thing in a short handbook he wrote on 'faith, hope and love.' What I do here is in that tradition, as homage not as equal. What I most appreciate about his insights was that you must use your mind along with your emotions, because the truth of love is something mind and heart own together. If you expect in these pages a tribute to love, a sort of inspirational book with soothing phrases, turn back now. If you want to know the true nature of love turn the page. You will find you can not only weather storms with greater confidence, you will have a better compass to help you find your way.

W. F. Wooden, 2020

1. Love is All You Need?

“Love, n. A temporary insanity curable by marriage.” — Ambrose Bierce, The Unabridged Devil's Dictionary

Love is complicated. But we rarely notice that. Often we just ‘feel’ it because we all think love is a ‘feeling.’ Of course it is, but it is more than that, and failing to think about what we feel is what allows false and distorted ideas of love to thrive. But thinking about love means being dispassionate, skeptical and analytical, which somehow seems the opposite of love, doesn’t it? But if, as the Bible says, “the truth will set you free,” learning the truth about love cannot make it less. In fact, thinking about love, seeking the deep down truth of it, will make it not less but actually more. Paradoxical as it seems, we need to think about love to be better at feeling it. Because until we can see the half loves and false loves, we are susceptible to falling for the equivalent of Fool’s Gold.

Here is an example of mistaking the false for the true. I began this work on a St. Valentine’s Day a few years ago. I learned the same story we all heard, of a gentle early Christian saint, imprisoned for his faith, who sends tender messages of love that become known as Valentines, which inspired people ever since to send letters to their beloved on his feast day.

Turns out that never happened. First of all, there is more than one St. Valentine. There are about eleven Valentines among the saints honored by the Roman Catholic Church. Second, the idea of it being a feast of romantic love did not begin until nearly a thousand years after the Roman era, somewhere around the 14th century. Chaucer made the connection in his poetry,

“For this was sent on Seynt Valentyne’s day
Whan every foul cometh ther to choose his mate.”

Folks in his day believed birds mated on St. Valentine’s feast day, which was not true but by mid-February in the northern hemisphere winter is waning and no doubt some bird species are preparing to mate and nest. It may also be that the feast day for the amalgamated saint grew up the way Christmas did, as a replacement for a pagan Roman fertility ritual. February was when young Roman men would run through the cities flinging strips of goat hide dipped in goat blood onto young women (romantic, huh?) who would then have enhanced fertility. The very name of the month, February, comes from the Latin word for goat hide, *februa*.

St. Valentine's Day is more complicated than you thought. Likewise, there are several ideas about love, which seem true at first but as you look a little deeper, they are not the whole story. Like the parable of the blind men and the elephant, we often assume that whatever we know is the whole truth, and that makes us blind to what we do not know.

So let's consider one popular idea about love, enshrined in the song that says, "love is all you need." It is a "lovely" notion, and given the amount of hostility and hatred in the world a strong dose of love would be good medicine for what ails us. But obviously, love is not all we need. Love literally cannot feed us. If we do not live by bread alone, as Jesus said to Satan, we also do not live by love alone.

Why, then, do we say it? I think one reason is that we still operate on a really old idea that the material is separate from the spiritual. It's presumed by all the world's major religions and an easy notion to believe. You can easily see how people came to that conclusion long ago. We have thoughts that appear in our minds silently, and when we sleep we dream which happens while our bodies are inactive. What is death but when the body goes inert? Body and soul sure appear to be separate things. And it persists into our era, with appealing phrases like, "We are not human beings having a spiritual experience; we are spiritual beings having a human experience."

But as obvious as this appears to be, our senses also say that the sun revolves around the earth which we know is false. Maybe we should question whether our senses and experience tells us the whole truth (see elephant above).

Alongside this common idea that the material is separate from the spiritual is the idea that the spirit is more important than the body. This too is old and still offers an easy explanation for evil and suffering, If the spiritual is more important, then physical suffering is less important. If you are poor it doesn't matter, because we will all go to heaven or be reincarnated. If you are hungry, be of good courage for in the next life you will not hunger. "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of Heaven." Treasure in heaven, many of us were told, awaits those who suffered in life. This is exactly what Marx meant by religion being the opiate of the masses, a drug that dulled the pain of this life with promises of eternal life. For many, long ago and even now, life is one of hunger and fear and oppression with little hope of it ending before death. Can we blame them for hoping something better lies beyond this 'veil of tears,' something that gives their lives some meaning and purpose?

But that theory also excuses the physical and emotional suffering that humans dealt out to each other, and excuses also the privileges of wealth and power. Ever wonder who came up with the idea of 'treasure in heaven?' Something tells me that person had plenty of treasure on earth. Saying 'love is all

we need' comes awfully close to 'treasure in heaven.' It implies that our physical needs are secondary if not downright trivial.

I am not here to settle the riddle of flesh and spirit, though. I brought this up to show how an apparently simple notion is not simple at all. Like St. Valentine, there is an iceberg of ideas and beliefs that lie below the surface of most of our common ideas, such as what love is and means. When we are told that love is the greatest good it may be, and I would agree, but if that means a purely spiritualized version, good feelings, then we are far from real love. And indeed, even in earliest Christianity we have James, the brother of Jesus, warning the followers about the dangers of that idea: "What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and filled," without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that? So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead."

I am saying that physical reality is not secondary to or even separate from the spiritual. After all, suffering and injustice are afflictions that we feel in our spirits as well as our bodies. Ta- Nehisi Coates' powerful book *Between the World and Me*, says, "What I told you is what your grandparents tried to tell me: that this is your country, that this is your world, that this is your body, and you must find some way to live within the all of it." Physical struggles are spiritual struggles. Mohandas Gandhi said it starkly, "To a hungry man a piece of bread is the face of God." To someone in pain, drugs are god. Whether it be poverty or prison, gender or sexuality, race or religion, for unnumbered millions physical suffering is a tourniquet that stifles the spirit. Love is simply not enough to answer all that.

In all honesty, we know this. If it we really believed it we would never see a doctor or take an aspirin. Then why do we say it when we know it isn't true? Because the feeling of love is necessary, but it is not sufficient.

To explain this I need to engage in something really esoteric and boring: logic. What could be more cold and analytical than that? "Necessary and sufficient" are two conditions to satisfy an argument usually stated as "If P then Q." If P (some assertion) is true, then Q will also be true. It is possible for P to be necessary for Q but not sufficient. Q may need P and R, for example. We like to think there is a straight line from cause to effect, but sometimes it takes more than one cause to create an effect. If I have a match and no candle, I cannot create much light. Likewise, if I have a candle but no match I cannot create any light at all. Each is necessary but neither alone is sufficient.

I am saying that the feeling of love is necessary but not sufficient all by itself. The poor and the sick, the disabled and the oppressed feel love but that does not itself overcome the struggles that suffering they endure. The rich and powerful feel love but it does not make them share their wealth with others.

So we have a second reason to question the song. It may even make love a sort of salve or emollient, something that eases the struggle, like Marx's opiate. For some no doubt it is, but in my argument here, that feeling is not love itself. The feeling we call love is not the point; the feeling is the pointer.

The feeling we call love is more like hunger. It *directs* us to what we love. When we feel love we are saying that this person or thing matters to us a lot. What you love can be a good thing or a bad thing. How many people have fallen for someone who was bad for them? Plenty of people 'love' money or sex or power. They feel that feeling, but what they feel it about is not always good for them. We can love something that does not matter as much as we think, like that toy at Christmas. But when we feel that thing we call love, whatever we love seems like the most important thing for us.

And in a strange sense, it actually is. Something old can help me explain this paradox. "*Ubi caritas et amor est, deus ibi est.*" Where charity and love are, God is. This text, so old that no one knows who wrote it, connects love and God. God, of course, is, in religion, the object and source of most importance. *Caritas*, translated as charity, also means love. *Amor* we all understand as the Latin word for the emotion we call love. *Caritas* is about care. You can even hear the connection when you say them together, *caritas* and *care*. What they both have in common is still audible in the Italian word *caro*, as in the Italian phrase, '*caro mio,*' my dear. Many language have multiple words that mean love, but in English we put 'love' at the top and regard the others as lesser. But something dear, of course, is something of we care about and which we say has value.

To care about something is to say it matters to you. Anyone who has been married for a while will tell you that love is more about caring for someone than the urgent feeling we all generally call love. That first feeling tells signals desire, as a child longs for a toy, or as an adolescent crush on someone. Both turn out to be less than we expected. When my son was thirteen he saw a radio driven airplane that he simply had to have. I found it in a store and saw its rather flimsy construction, but my wife prevailed upon me and there it was Christmas morning. In his haste to open it, something got broken and it never flew. He was so sad and I was as well, as I knew it would let him down. Some years later I am still sensitive about that disappointment even while he has moved on. Why? My love for my son is something that really does matter. It is a love worthy of my affection, which is why his unhappiness becomes mine.

In religion, the thing of utmost value is God, which is why we are told to 'love God,' because that is the most worthy object of our affection. Thus in that Latin phrase God is both subject and object, the thing that loves and is loved. Very poetic, but also rather abstract. Love as we experience it is concrete. Therein lies the problem of love in the real world, for we want to love and be loved at the same time, to have that divine experience of being both subject and object, loving and being loved. But in this world that doesn't always happen. That's why we mistake the pointer for the point, the longing for the object longed for; and in doing so end up loving the feeling inside us not the object outside us.

Whenever we love or care about something that is of less value than ourselves we commit the sin of idolatry. Technically, idolatry is worshipping something as God that is not God. And worship, as you may know, literally means to give worth. Emerson noted long ago that "what we are worshipping we are becoming." When that love attaches to something of less value than we are, a radio controlled airplane say, we are diminished not enhanced. We make ourselves into objects. The sin of idolatry is not that God is offended by it (which is what religion often says) but that we offend ourselves, we put our human nature in service to something of less than human. This too sounds rather abstract so let me put some flesh on these bones; my own, which is the only flesh I have a right to display.

Other teenagers loved the Beatles. I loved Beethoven. Other teens dreamed of being rock stars, I dreamed of writing symphonies. I bought music, studied theory, collected recordings, and wrote reams of pages, almost all of it terrible. This was my first love, and there are many souvenirs of it still in my basement. You could say it was an unrequited love, as music did not love me as much as I did it. Despite years of study and labor, the muse itself did not touch me. When I was honest with myself, I loved the idea of being a composer not composing itself. I worshipped the idea of artistic fame, not the work that achieved it, and that longing for fame came from a deeper darker sense of failure and rejection. The love of music was complicated by my need for approval. I confused love for something with a need for myself.

Almost everyone has longed for something, desired something, sought something, not for itself but for what it would do for them. When we think something – money, fame, even 'love' – can make us whole, we think it will meet all our needs. We make an idol of that thing. And that isn't love, no matter how many songs and poems and movies say so.

When we say, "all we need is love," we usually mean the feeling. But if we are honest, what we feel is not love for itself but what it does *for* us. And that is not love. That is desire, which we will take up

next. For now, what's important is to give up longing for the longing, looking for the feeling, valuing the emotion as the 'pearl of great price.' It is the pointer at best, and never the point.

It is not cynical to admit we need more than love. No person, no dream, no country and no religion can be all we need. If that spoils the idea of Valentine's Day, and ruins all the rom coms, or threatens your faith and patriotism, I am not sorry because I have seen real love. About twenty years ago my father was dealing with his third cancer, and it had taken a toll on both he and my mother. They quarreled more and kept it no secret from the neighbor mom had hired to help her keep house. "I'm worried about them," she told me in a whisper. Now I was worried. I drove them to dad's next medical gauntlet, at a hospital where his chart is wheeled in on a cart because it is so long and complicated. They were sullen and silent during the drive. I pulled up in front of the hospital so they could get out and I could park the car. They walked slowly toward the sliding door and just before going in she slipped her hand in his and he squeezed it just as I remember seeing him do it in better times. I wasn't worried now. The care was there.

In John's version of the gospel Jesus gives a 'new commandment, that you love one another.' I believe that means to see in another other not something that will make you worthy, but something worthy of your love. There it is. Love is not all you need to live. It is what your life has to give.

2. A Burning Ring of Fire?

1 Kings 18: "When it was time to present the meal offering, the prophet Elijah came forward and said, "O Lord, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel! Let it be known today that You are God in Israel and that I am Your servant, and that I have done all these things at Your bidding. Answer me, O Lord, answer me, that this people may know that You, O Lord, are God; for You have turned their hearts backward." Then fire from the Lord descended and consumed the burnt offering, the wood, the stones, and the earth; and it licked up the water that was in the trench."

What could be a more typical notion of love than this song:

"I fell into a burnin' ring of fire
I went down, down, down
And the flames went higher
And it burns, burns, burns
The ring of fire, the ring of fire."

Lust is what the song is about, sexual longing, which anyone who was ever twenty years old remembers. Long ago I was a student minister in Massachusetts, but my newlywed wife was a teacher in Chicago. For three months we saw each other only once, over the Easter holiday, and boy was I excited about that visit. She arrived with the flu.

After she went home, I was talking to my supervising minister, not yet fifty but closing in, and expressing my great disappointment that our visit was confined to modest affections. "I am so glad," he said, "to have that monkey off my back." At the time I felt pity for the man. Today, now older than he was then, I understand him. "Monkey love," slang for sexual frenzy, is stock in trade for movies and television: the passionate embrace, the clawing at clothing, the tumble onto beds, onto floors and even tables; a voracious desire that 'burns burns burns,' as the song says.

Of course that fire of desire is way older than Johnny Cash. The story behind the song claims that the line, "love is a burning ring of fire," came from a book of Elizabethan poems. I love going to the opera which means I have seen dozens of stories about burning desire. Operatic lust and love almost always go hand in hand with passion and danger and make a reliably combustible formula, emotional nitroglycerin which makes for great opera but lousy reality.

It's great for religion, too. How many ideas of God are some concoction of love and longing, passion and danger, desire and dread? Tell me religion isn't operatic? Eve gives in to her lust for knowledge, which condemns her to lust for sex, and all of us to death and misery; which then leads to fratricide, floods and more. That happens in less than ten pages, and it's only the beginning.

How about the story about Elijah? He challenges the priests of Baal, the cult of the foreign born queen Jezebel who is married to King Ahab of Israel. Her priests pray and dance and gash themselves to make a blood sacrifice. Can you hear their fervid cries and the pounding of ancient drums? Nothing happens. Then Elijah has the altar doused with water several times, to make it harder to burn, and prays quietly. A tongue of fire comes out of the sky and consumes the wood and even the stones, leaving just a hissing puddle.

Can you see a pattern? Passionate desire sets fires that destroy things in opera and books and plays and religion. It burns inside and when let out burns everything around it. Sexual lust can burn people up, but it is by no means the only thing that burns. Religious passion can destroy as well. So why do we think sexual desire is more loving than desire for power or money, or even for God? If history is a guide, we should be very wary of passions.

That's why I pause when I hear people talking about, and extolling, their 'passions.' I understand why it's an attractive idea. Who wants to pursue something they do not want? And aren't we impressed with the dedication of athletes and artists who devote hours to their craft? People who tell us to follow our passions seem to forget that the word passion means suffering.

Who wants to suffer? The determined athlete suffers and the driven artist suffers, which is part of the story we all expect: countless hours spent at the free throw line or playing scales or studying mathematics to reach mastery and success. But we also know that plenty of poor folks work hard – two and three jobs – and never get rich; for every fortunate 'star' there are countless 'meteors' who burned up without catching fire.

Turning back to more basic passions, like the lust I suffered in a small personal way back in 1978, unlike opera I did not let my unmet desire drive me to get it elsewhere, which would have been a much greater suffering. I did not 'follow my passion' because there lay the path to suffering. After pious Elijah there comes Elisha who gives in to his anger when teased by some boys, and sends wild bears to kill them. He gave in to his passion, as it were. Serving one's passions is far from love.

Unlike preachers who tell you what is true, I tell people what is not true. More precisely, I try to undermine what people think is true but is not. That's what Elijah did, if you think about it. He undermined the belief of the priests of Baal. Far from following his passion, he showed the priests of Baal the falsehood of theirs. Jesus did it whenever he said, "You have heard it said, but I say..." and questioned tradition. Today it is the role of science to question received wisdom. Science, we are told, 'proves things.' But we should remember that the word 'prove' means to test, like a 'proving ground.' You can prove something is false as well as true. In fact, proving something is false is more valuable in science than proving it is true. Once something is shown false you can leave it be. But everything that is 'proven' to be true to be true must be tested again and again to make sure. Science is also what the Buddha used when he said that desire is the source of suffering. He pursued the passions he saw around him and realized much of what made people unhappy was their desire for something that did not truly satisfy their need.

Desire is not love, not at all, not even a little. I understand why we make this mistake. When we desire something, it has value to us as I said in the first part. Getting what we desire adds to our own sense of value. Status, money, and possessions all have value in our world. The nice car and the promotion make us feel more valuable. An old joke describes the immigrant family who had succeeded in America. They had become wealthy and wanted the finer things in life. One day, at a fancy restaurant, the husband choked on his steak. He passes out and someone says, "Give him artificial respiration." His wife leaps up and says, "He gets real respiration or nothing." Pleasures like food and sex satisfy the body in elemental ways. It is easy to conflate physical sensations with emotional desires. If hunger is suffering, abundance is then pleasure.

Turning back to desire, desire often feels like suffering, and sex is clearly pleasurable. Our bodies as well as our minds feel this desire. We do not simply want it, we need it. But in the case of lust what we desire is another person, which is how sexual desire becomes emotional desire, a sense that this person will make us more complete. That feeling, the desire for something that will make us complete, is why lust is not love. Desire is about getting, having, holding, owning, possessing. But if we think about it, can we possess another person? Is another person something we can have and control?

Sadly, we live surrounded by images of love that are not love, and ideas of love that are not love. I have shown that love is not all you need. Now I am saying that desire is not love, however much we are told it is. This really does seem a dreary journey.

But I am not alone much less first. Herman Hesse's short novel Siddhartha follows a similar path. Set in ancient India about a fictional man who longed to know the truth of life, his search encounters the historic Buddha with whom he shares the name Siddhartha. It shows the entangling power of desire, how it reflects and amplifies our sense that somehow we lack something. Only when he detaches his sense of self from the attractions of the world does he begin to find peace. But it takes a lifetime.

The thousands who attend political rallies want something; something that they sense is missing in their lives. But can one person, no matter how charismatic do that? No. The millions who seek God or salvation want something; something that assures them that their lives matter. Can we ever truly know that God exists and knows us? No. "Where in our hearts is that burning of desire," says the Islamic poet Mohammed Iqbal, "Whence comes that drive is us?" Neither he nor I know, but we all have a memory of desire, of longing for something down to our bones of what seems to be missing. We all feel this way. I do, almost every day. And here is where we most need to question our notion of love.

Now let me introduce a curious notion, very ancient as well. Maybe what seems like a hollow place in us, where something is missing, is actually a room, something intended to be empty. We are not missing something at all. What feels like an absence is actually part of what we are supposed to be. And to make it even more odd, perhaps they are not absences but presences.

3. Love Me Like a Rock

Luke 15: ... Then the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' But the father said to his slaves, 'Quickly, bring out a robe--the best one--and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!' And they began to celebrate. "Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. He replied, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.' Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. But he answered his father, 'Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!' Then the father said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.'"

One chord makes that song by Paul Simon great, just one chord. Musicians call it a 'hook,' the thing that catches the listener. You know which one, too. It is a dominant seventh chord based on the sub-dominant, and it comes in with the back-up singers, in their echo of the text. The singer sings, "Who do?" and the backup singers sing "Who?" That "Who?" is the chord I mean. You can hear it right now, no doubt. The lyrics tell of a man who faced temptation and did not give in because his mama 'loves me like a rock.'

Mother love. If there is a stereotype of love that is as durable and universal as romantic love it is mother love. And it is almost as wrong.

I have disputed the notion that 'love is all you need,' which is manifestly not true. Yes, Jesus did say we do not live by bread alone, but we still need bread. Johnny Cash did sing that 'love is a burning thing,' but the fires of passion can destroy as well you know. Mother love is almost the opposite of desire when you think about it. Selfless devotion is closer, and it is probably better than selfish desire; but that, too, is not actual love. Here's why.

Desire, as I said before, seeks to possess something, something that fills what feels empty in our hearts. In romantic love this person will complete me, fill what is empty. The Bible speaks of two becoming one flesh. In the Symposium, Plato's version of Aristophanes says love is the desire for reunion of one person torn apart by Zeus. No less a figure than Augustine of Hippo, St. Augustine, said: "Thou hast made us for thyself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it finds its rest in thee." Is not desire a restless heart, evident by that perpetual incompleteness we feel but cannot quite define?

Now let's return to that enigmatic thought I left you with before, that perhaps the empty places we feel in our hearts are not absences but presences. Consider a water pitcher, an object which exists to contain an empty space. The emptiness is part of what it is, what makes it a pitcher and not just a hunk of clay. The empty place we all have in ourselves, the thing that makes us feel hungry or incomplete, is like that: not a flaw but an essential part of what we are.

To make more sense of this we need a story. A seminary class mate gave birth to her first child weeks before our graduation. We visited Donna and baby Charlotte in their tiny apartment next to the school. It was less than a day after giving birth, so she was still tired and a bit dazed, but she shared with us – nursing as she spoke – that she now understood how someone could give their life for someone else. The gospel of John, which I quoted earlier, goes on to say, "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends."

Such devotion is the opposite of desire, a giving rather than a getting. The parable of the prodigal son is a story of devotion, a father who welcomes the wayward son. In Paul Simon's song, it is the devotion of a mother that saves the man from the temptations of the devil: "My mama loves, she loves me, She gets down on her knees and hugs me, She loves me like a rock, She rocks me like the rock of ages."¹

Did you hear how Simon describes mother love as like 'the rock of ages' which is a familiar metaphor for God? Several times in the Bible God is described as mother. Deuteronomy says, "Like the eagle that stirs up its nest, and hovers over its young, God spreads to catch you, and carries you on pinions." And elsewhere, "You were unmindful of the Rock that bore you; you forgot the God who gave you birth." Isaiah writes: "As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you; you shall be comforted in Jerusalem." And, "Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you." In Matthew Jesus says: "Jerusalem, Jerusalem,

¹ Worth noting in our unfortunate political times is that the first verse starts with "When I was a little boy and the devil would call my name," the second starts with "When I was grown to be a man, and the devil would call my name," and the third starts "If I was the president, and the Congress called my name." Let those with eyes see, and those with ears hear.)

the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!” And that is just a few examples.

Sure sounds like love, but as I said it is not quite. Yes, it is about giving not getting, but even giving can be selfish as well. You may know the famous lightbulb joke that plays on a stereotype, asking how many Jewish Mothers does it take to change a lightbulb? None. “You go and have a nice time,” she says, “I’ll just sit in the dark until you come home.” That is selfish devotion, using devotion to get something in return. In the end, it is manipulative devotion that exacts a price. It could be guilt or shame or loyalty, but whatever it may be, the purpose of that devotion is to get something not to give something.

This is why I am not a formal Christian. Standard doctrine makes God out to be the “Jewish Mother,” who gives only if you give back, who will die for you only if you live for her. No one would call that love. I am not saying God is actually like that, but the church often seems to operate that way. Ironically, the church worships its God exactly opposite the example of the God they say they follow.

And that brings me back to the enigmatic notion that the absence in us is actually a presence; like a water pitcher, it is something we have not something we lack. But it is true that in some ways a womb is shaped like a pitcher, isn’t it? Designed to hold something, right? Not forever, but for a while. And as we all have one X chromosome that means even men are half female. Remember the song? “She gets down on her knees and hugs me.” Most of us have that exact memory. I took a nasty fall when I was eight. Got all cut and bruised; and all I wanted was my mother to hug me. She was not home, though. The painful memory of not being held is stronger than the memory of the actual physical pain. But I remember with equal clarity another moment a year or so later when asleep in the car as we came home, my father carried me half asleep to bed. Even now, nearly sixty years later, I can feel his arms and hear his heartbeat.

And now, as a parent myself, that memory is enriched with moments when my sons were sad and I was able to console them, and memories of their smooth arms around my neck and their heads against my chest. We long to be held, and to hold. Yes, we want to be individuals and make our own lives, but we also want to be connected and comforted and cared about. The empty space inside us is meant – designed? – to hold someone. Not just for our sake, not only to meet our personal needs, but because we are not whole unless we are holding and being held.

My idea of love starts here. It is more than this, as the word is more than one letter. But without this it is not love. You were meant to hold and to be held. Love rises from this.

4. Ain't No Sunshine

John 12: Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. 12:4 But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?" (He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.) Jesus said, "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me."

When March finally melted the snow, the last leaves from autumn and scattered sticks from the trees battered by winter weather reappeared on the lawn. Helen was eager to clean it up, ever the Martha in a family where her sister Dorothy was glad to take the dramatic role of Mary. From the kitchen window I saw her, my mother-in-law, scraping the rake over the lawn while wearing Roger's old windbreaker.

Roger died the previous October after a year of cancer. He slipped away on a Saturday while Helen sat alongside him in the hospital room reading the newspaper. We had been there that morning and were driving back so I could be in the pulpit. The state police pulled us over to tell us Roger died so we turned around after I called a colleague to fill in for me Sunday morning.

Helen was a careful dresser. Roger's windbreaker was anything but fashionable. It was too large for her as well, stained and worn. When she came in she hung it in the hall closet where she kept the vacuum cleaner and carefully ironed table cloths hung on hangars. Everything had a place and everything had better be in it. Because we were there, I fetched the vacuum cleaner and caught an aroma. It was Roger's cigars, menthol Eriks, likely the cause of his cancer. It clung to his windbreaker.

So far, I have deconstructed and demolished the half-truths of love. It is not 'All you need,' nor 'A burning thing,' nor is it 'Like a rock.' Appealing as those images are, they are not love. At best they are shadows that are shaped like love. And as Plato so famously imagined, we mistake the shadow for the object until we see the object itself.

I just hinted that what all the shadows say in common is that love is essential to our nature. If those other notions are not right about what love is, they are quite right that it is vital to being fully alive. What they have in common is the connection to other beings.

I happened on an article by David Eagleman, a scientist now at Stanford University. He contends that our brains became the way they are because we are connected to other people. That is, we become self-aware individuals because we need to speak, understand, judge actions, and other forms of interaction with fellow humans. We would not have the powers of individuality such as self-consciousness and reflection, without 'society.' He says we literally cannot be individuals without other people making us one. This reverses the enlightenment notion from Locke and Rousseau who presumed individuality comes first and that society is made of individuals forming societies. Eagleman is saying that science proves the opposite. We gain our individuality from society, from interaction. Interaction leads to individuation.

Our need for connection is more than human, actually. Harry Harlow, a psychologist at the Univ. of Wisconsin in the mid-1950s did a famous experiment with rhesus monkeys where surrogate mother monkeys made of wire had bottles for feeding while soft cloth mother monkey surrogates did not. Baby monkeys drank the milk from the one, but spent the rest of their time cuddling with the cloth mother. He discovered in other experiments that deprived of contact with even false cloth mothers, baby monkeys displayed behaviors that looked like depression. Connection is as essential as mother's milk to a baby. We know this best when it is gone. Bill Withers says it well.

Ain't no sunshine when she's gone
 It's not warm when she's away
 Ain't no sunshine when she's gone
 And she's always gone too long
 Anytime she goes away

We all know the aphorism that absence makes the heart grow fonder, but that's about romance not love. Withers sings of something deeper – of loss, of how life loses its liveliness. Anyone who ever felt grief knows that feeling. Going to the third verse of that great song,

"Ain't no sunshine when she's gone,
 Only darkness every day
 Ain't no sunshine when she's gone
 And this house just ain't no home"

Grief and loss bring a deep shadow over our lives, as we all know from experience. How often is love compared to light? "You are the light of my life," and so on. Grief is a shrouded gravestone, shadow.

Light means life, darkness death. Love brings life and its absence feels like death. Indeed, most Christian notions of hell emphasize that it is eternal separation from God, eternal cosmic loneliness.

Here is the place where I stopped writing for hours, trying to find the way to express the next part.

What I wanted to do is convince you that when we grieve for a certain person and feel darkness in our hearts, or long for one person as the light of our lives, the feeling is real but the cause is misplaced. It is not the particular person. We may feel it, and think it, but it is not so. But I could not find the words. Maybe I was wrong.

Then I remembered something. For some years I began my preaching seasons with wisdom for Anne Morrow Lindbergh's timeless book, "A Gift from the Sea," which ruminates on life and love and being a wife and mother. In it she quotes the poet W. H. Auden, who wrote:

For the error bred in the bone
Of each woman and each man
Craves what it cannot have
Not universal love
But to be loved alone.

That is the error: to place all your hope in one particular love – the spouse or parent, the child.

Lindbergh answers Auden, saying, "There is no one-and-only, as a friend of mine once said in a similar discussion, 'there are just one-and-only moments.'"

If love illuminates life, then we have but moments of illumination, and all too often we use those moments poorly. Lindbergh is so wise in this. "Love does not consist in gazing at each other (one perfect sunrise gazing at another!) but in looking outward together in the same direction." This light is not for basking on an emotional beach somewhere, but to show the way to something more than itself, truth.

Here is what I want to tell you: The light of love exists to help us toward the true. John Milton, the great puritan poet, composed a stirring defense of free speech. In it he writes, "The light which we have gained was given us, not to be ever staring on, but by it to discover onward things more remote from our knowledge."

You know this is so. Consider the people you love, for whom you have affection. Each of them shed light on you that you could not see alone. If romance is as Paul Valery says, "being stupid together," genuine love is becoming wise together. And if you are honest, some of those people were there but a

moment, but in that 'one and only moment' something became visible. That is Mary's gift in the gospel passage. She treasures the moment of love and light, anointing it not just the man. Whenever the truth becomes known, especially when we have resisted or avoided it, we have love to thank. And we give thanks by loving in return.

Helen did not care for jazz or blues or anything like that. But she knew what Bill Withers was talking about. Wearing Roger's windbreaker with its tobacco odor was her way of hanging on to the twilight, the last thin strands of light after the sun has passed beyond our view. We were never close, she and I, having taken her daughter away. But my heart cherishes the memory of seeing her in the yard that early spring day. I saw something in her that illuminated something in me. For that I loved her, then and now.

5. Teaching Stones to Talk

Luke 19:.. As he rode along, people kept spreading their cloaks on the road. As he was now approaching the path down from the Mount of Olives, the whole multitude of the disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the deeds of power that they had seen, saying, "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!" Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, order your disciples to stop." He answered, "I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out."

Three women taught me what I am telling you in this essay. The first is Annie Dillard the author and naturalist. I bought a volume of her essays soon after seminary. She was very quotable back then, quite the literary star and lots of erudite preachers were quoting her in their sermons. The title essay is "Teaching a Stone to Talk." You have to admit it is a great title, juxtaposing the ordinary and extraordinary, hinting at something hidden in the obvious; memorable as well.

That phrase came to mind as I contemplated another Palm Sunday. The story happens in all four gospels, though with variations. In all four Jesus rides a small animal and people greet him like a king. In Mark and Luke it is a colt, in Matthew a colt and a donkey. In Matthew, Mark and Luke, Jesus sends his disciples to fetch them. In John Jesus finds a donkey himself. Only in Luke do his opponents scold him for allowing such a display. "Teacher, order your disciples to stop." He answered, "I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out."

That's the phrase that reminded me of Dillard. Now, hyperbole it was but a mere tool in Jesus' kit. Making an entrance was his point, after all, but for two purposes. One was to assert his own authority, the other was to mock the authority of the powers that be. I remember when Abbie Hoffman and his radical friends threw money from a balcony onto the floor of the New York Stock Exchange, giving away what the traders were trying to sell. Both acts got attention from the powerful. The Stock Exchange balcony has been glassed in ever since. Wouldn't want people giving money away at the Stock Exchange, would we? And in Jerusalem the high and mighty decided Jesus needed to be dealt with.

Now let me introduce the second woman, a colleague named Ruth, who came to her little Massachusetts church the year after I started in my even smaller church the next town over. She was Congregationalist, I Unitarian, but in Massachusetts they are not far apart. We got on well and near

Easter one year she said, "I think that where Jesus says, 'the stones would shout out' Jesus is hinting that he expected to be stoned to death." Stoning was the standard Jewish punishment for sacrilege. Jesus violates the temple area soon after riding into town. He knew what he was doing. Referring to the stones shouting could mean that the stones thrown at would testify to his mission as much as the people lining the road that day.

So we have two notions of what Jesus might mean when he says "the stones would shout out." One is that he was the Messiah, which could not be silenced even if no one sang or noticed. And second is the implication that Jesus' death would be part of that revelation, that the stones he presumed would kill him would ultimately testify that he was the 'suffering servant' promised by Isaiah.

And here is a third notion. Dillard says, "Nature's silence is its one remark, and every flake of [the] world is a chip off that old mute and immutable block." ... Silence as speech. Dillard is often called a mystic, infatuated with the spiritual in nature. She speaks as a mystic of the 'via negativa,' a term I used at the outset of this excursion which means seeking God by removing what is not God. Nature does not reveal God so much as remind us that we know very little and should not presume to know more than a sliver of truth. The medieval scholar John Scotus Erigena long ago understood this: "We do not know what God is. God Himself does not know what He is because He is not anything. Literally God is not, because He transcends being." Dillard's stone speaks of such a God, a non being that – to recall a phrase I used earlier – is not an absence but a presence.

I have carved away the notions that Love is 'all you need,' that it is 'a burning ring of fire,' that it is 'like a rock.' What we have left after taking away these familiar notions is a place where those notions were. But that space is not mere absence but a place that contains or surrounds, as a pitcher contains the place where water can be. It is not merely empty, but the place where truth can be heard. When the Bible says "God is love," to me that means love is not a *thing* any more than God is a *thing*. It means that what seems to be empty in our heart is a niche, like the mihrab in a mosque, which is an empty place that points toward Mecca, the center of Islam. Think of an actual heart, the physical organ. It is made of auricles and ventricles that are made to be empty in order to hold and move blood.

The third woman is Orlanda, a colleague of mine who died as I was writing this essay. She and I were that awful term 'frenemies.' Painter, poet, pastor, professor and provocateur, she worked with me in my Brooklyn church. I was her supervisor, but she never hesitated to give me direction. Global in her friendships, she described to me once her meeting with a Buddhist who had achieved enlightenment

according to their tradition. She asked him what enlightenment felt like. He smiled the Buddhist smile and said simply, "It is as if everything is alive."

When we are in love we get a glimpse of that, don't we? There is a certain electricity to life when we are in love, a time when everything feels more real and, yes, alive. That does not last because being 'in love' cannot last. Why?

Because that sensation is the pointer not the point, as I said early on. All the usual notions of love are but pointers, shadows, of love. They are reflections not the real thing. Romance or desire or family or country or even religion can give us that sense of aliveness, but like a drug the sensation wears off after a time because they all turn out to be as imperfect as we are. Loving the feeling, though, and sensing that it has something to do with the 'pearl of great price,' when it wanes we go in search of it again.

Some fall in love over and over, some pursue a lifetime of sexual pleasure, some endure abusive families for fear of losing them, some become fervent patriots, some become devout believers. Those are only four examples but there are doubtless more. They really do feel like love, and when we have that feeling we want it again, because it is the ultimate feeling of being alive and mattering.

One of the things that make people attend worship is so they can recall (even feel) the moment when they felt that aliveness the first time, when something ultimate and intimate connected for them. They are the realest moments. Auden, in another famous poem about Christmas says it is a time when 'everything was a You and nothing was an It.' That's what the monk means, what Dillard seeks, what we all have sensed, what makes the world go round, the alpha and omega.

We do not want a different world; we want this one fully alive. The early Christian theologian Iranaeus wonderfully said, *Gloria Dei est vivens homo*. "The glory of God is man fully alive." We want a world and a life where everything seems to be alive, where the silence of the stones is music, darkness is a sort of light; a world where everything lives and moves and has its being.

Maybe that is what Jesus was saying when he said the stones would shout. Maybe that is what he means when he said the 'kingdom of God is within you' if we had eyes to see and ears to hear. The stones are singing, as Jesus said; and the air, and the earth. The dust on my dresser is alive, and the filth of the streets of Delhi, the tears of children shivering in Syria, the rage of black folk and poor folk and factory workers fired without pensions and old men in wheelchairs sitting in fetid nursing homes. The lead poisoned water of Flint Michigan is alive, and the governor who should have acted sooner, and the sapphire lakes that surround my state and the zebra mussels that pollute it and the Asian carp that

threaten it. Landfills are alive, and potholes that dent our car wheels, and the wheels themselves. Snow is alive, and rain, and the mud they make, and the peeling paint on my garage doors, and the cancer that stalks our bodies, and the bills we pay, the grease on the stove that I scrubbed off yesterday; every blessed thing is alive.

I know this, but I do not feel it. That's what we want, though, to feel the aliveness. And for a moment, now and then, sometimes even in church, we can almost sense it, like when we hear a faint sound, a distant breathing that is almost singing, a hum like we felt when our mothers sang as we nursed, something inside us much as outside. That is what we want to feel, all the time.

"Inside this clay jug," says the Indian poet Kabir, "are "All seven oceans, and hundreds of millions of stars... the music from the strings no one touches." We are all clay jugs feeling rather empty most of the time, as though something were missing. So we seek a particular object to fill us, when it is the emptiness that is priceless, for only when the place is not filled can oceans roll and stars twinkle, can stones shout and grass whisper; only not filled can air becomes breath and breath become song. And song – which exists only in the hollow place inside – is what makes the thing alive; that is what we want, that is God, that is love.

6. I Come to the Garden Alone – A Sobering Epilogue

Mark 14: They went to a place called Gethsemane; and he said to his disciples, 'Sit here while I pray.' He took with him Peter and James and John, and began to be distressed and agitated. And he said to them, 'I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and keep awake.' And going a little farther, he threw himself on the ground and prayed that, if it were possible, the hour might pass from him. He said, 'Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want.'

Even in the Unitarian home of my boyhood we dressed for church and had Sunday dinner. If we visited relatives it could use up the whole day. About the only thing that made Sunday not the most boring day of the week was the funny papers. I liked Beetle Bailey and the Wizard of Id and Peanuts of course. My grandmother was fond of Family Circus. She would cut them out and send them to us from time to time. It still runs, and is in fact the longest running most widely published comic strip in the world. One of them came to mind as I was working on this. The family is standing in church, singing a hymn, and one of the kids is looking up at mom saying, "Who's Andy?" "And he walks with me and he talks with me, and he tells me I am his own," was the refrain from a hoary old hymn that still has many heart strings in its grasp.

It begins, "I come to the garden alone." Few hymns could be more sentimental than this, so why bring it up? *Because* I hate the sentimentality of it, the cloying images of "the dew is still on the roses," and the birds that "hush their singing" when God speaks, "And the joy we share as we tarry there." One could not get further from actual biblical gardens: Eden is where serpents lurk and dangerous fruit hangs temptingly close, and Gethsemane is where Jesus went after supper and prayed drops of blood before being arrested.

"They went to a place called Gethsemane" Mark says. "He threw himself on the ground and prayed that, if it were possible, the hour might pass from him." This part of the passion story does not get told often. But I think it is the most important part because here is where Jesus realizes exactly what lies ahead. He throws himself on the ground as one who begs for mercy. After praying for a while he looks for his friends, and he finds "them sleeping; and he said... Could you not keep awake one hour?... the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak." Was he talking about them, or also himself? "And again

he went away and prayed," it says, "saying the same words." Luke adds, "In his anguish he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down on the ground."

There is no peace in this garden, no dew drops, no birds singing, no sweet melody, no Andy. This is a place of loneliness and struggle. Up until now Jesus has been the soul of composure, unflappable, serenely confident, the sort of fellow a savior ought to be. But now, when it's time to finish the job, he is anything but confident and composed. He is utterly human.

I like this Jesus, or better, I understand this Jesus. Because I have been in that sort of garden. If we are honest, we all have. Honesty has been my goal; to speak both as true to myself and as close to the truth as I know. It would be honest to say, for instance, that forty years ago I got cold feet about getting married, and nearly did not. It was a time when I was in the garden alone, struggling to know what my choice should be. Even now I can remember the struggle, how hard it was. Which was my true self, the one that had been engaged since I was nineteen or the man I was becoming at 23 in his first year of seminary? They felt different, my life felt different. I asked for advice from my parents and my minister. Neither said anything that made it any easier.

"You gotta walk that lonesome valley," is a great old song sung by Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger, Tom T. Hall, Elvis, and Johnny Cash. It's very different from "I come to the garden alone." But this is the one that is closer to Jesus.

"You gotta walk that lonesome valley
 And you gotta walk it by yourself
 Nobody else can walk it for you
 You gotta walk it by yourself.

That's what I mean, what we all know. Even if we do not throw ourselves on the ground and sweat blood, we all have moments when the choice ahead is agonizing. My father told me that after he got engaged he broke out in a terrible rash. His parents did not approve of my working class mother who lived with her mother, her aunt and her grandmother. He was torn and his body said so.

I have explored love along the *via negativa*, the way of negation. Love is not enough, love is not desire, love is not devotion. From deconstructing I began constructing, and now arrive at the summation. I have said this many times over the years, but good ideas need to be repeated; sometimes over and over, often to myself. Love is when the well-being of something else is essential to your own. It is the

opposite of a word from the 18th century, floccipaucinihilipilification, 29 letters long, which means estimating something as worthless. Love estimates something as priceless. And it's 25 letters shorter.

When we find ourselves in the lonesome valley, it is often because we find ourselves between two loves. We love many things: family and friends, community and church, nation and world. Each is part of us and each is precious. How can we choose one over the other when both are part of us and priceless? And yet sometimes, because we are fragmentary beings, and imperfect because we are fragmentary, we choose between loves that are themselves fragments: honor a person or an ethical principle, follow a dream or do a duty, preserve reputation or choose renunciation.

Anyone who is called to clergy life will be in the garden several times if they are honest. I came to my current community during a valley time, when it became clear I could not stay among people I knew and loved and also be true to the dreams and values that sustained me. I told my current church of my plan to retire four years in advance because I was in the valley again, trying to decide which path was best for me and for my church. To serve love is to walk the lonesome valley as often as beholding the glory of a world fully alive. That is the sad secret of love. It doesn't always feel very lovely.

"The struggle between God and man breaks out in everyone, together with the longing for reconciliation," says Nikos Kazantzakis. "Most often this struggle is unconscious and short-lived. A weak soul does not have the endurance to resist the flesh for very long. It grows heavy, becomes flesh itself, and the contest ends. But among responsible men, men who keep their eyes riveted day and night upon the Supreme Duty, the conflict between flesh and spirit breaks out mercilessly and may last until death." That is what it means to love. Not a life of bliss or serenity, but one where the flesh and the spirit, the fragmentary and the whole, desire and despair, are equally alive. Because if my life matters, and yours, and everyone else's, and everything else, not a day passes without something undone or unloved. Every day is a failure to love well.

Then another day comes.

Easter cannot exist without the Garden. Resurrection is not a happy coincidence. Like a flower or a tree, it must be planted. And like a flower or tree, not all seeds we plant will survive, as the parable knew. But if we hesitate to plant seeds because some or even most will not grow, then it is certain none will grow. Living the life of love means accepting the death of most things – including yourself and others - as the price of love.

I have tried to plant seeds in life, seeds in my children that may or may not grow; seeds for churches that they may 'spend all it [they have] for loveliness' to quote Sara Teasdale; that they be not 'rich in goods and poor in soul,' as Harry Emerson Fosdick said. Will they grow? I cannot say. To live love is to risk all for something you cannot be sure will come to pass. It is to die for the hope – but by no means the certainty – of something becoming what it could become. "Into your hands I commit my spirit," Jesus said on Friday. Dying was his job, resurrection was God's. When it comes to love, dying is required. Because without dying, resurrection is impossible.