

**What is Love?**  
**Rev. Linda Simmons**  
**May 13, 2018**

### **Friendship and Empathy**

Friendship and empathy is an aspect of in the poem Susan picked to read, Noble Thoughts, and Britt chose to read from Billy Collins and Sally will show us in a poem in she wrote. Friendship and empathy are described by some as the ability not only to treat others as you wish to be treated, but to treat others as you they wish to be treated. It is in some regards, the ability to put one self aside enough, or perhaps enter oneself so completely that self can become still and quiet and participate in what it might be like to be another, to come along side another as witness, companion, partner.

In one of the cities we passed through on our way to other locations in India, I choose a 4 star hotels online to stay. It had great photos and decent reviews but we found cockroaches and some kind of bugs in the bed and flying around us and hair in the food in the restaurant and Gary and I, when coming back into that same city on our way to the orphanage, discussed what we would do if the next 4 star hotel I choose, was as glorious as the last.

We learned a lot about friendship and empathy in India, namely toward each other. Stuck together through thick and thin for 2 months without a break was quite a teacher, though Gary did leave me once for 20 minutes to get some money from an ATM while I stayed in a café and drank chai, too tired to negotiate the dense crowd of cars and cows and people and motorbikes. Sipping my high octane milk and sugar tea that I came to love, knowing our cell phones did not work, completely cut off from Gary, and I imagined him getting hit by one of the many cars or taxis that came within an inch of one's body while crossing a street without crosswalks or walking down a road without sidewalks and what it would be like trying to find him in the local hospital, wherever that was. I worked myself into a state! When he sauntered back into the café, I jumped up and hugged him and told him I was sorry for every time I had ever been mean to him and he said he'd have to be 10 minutes late more often!

We learned in India that there are so many things we cannot control, things we like and do not like, things we want and do not want, things we think we deserve and do not deserve and in the end what matters is how we treat each other, others and ourselves. The rest is part a complicated story we have learned through too much privilege and a sense of time that very few people are gifted or cursed with. Of course, what we want and do not want matters and we need to talk about it.

But much more importantly is how we go about making sense of each moment together, how we go about making meaning together out of the chaos of this great patchwork of lives we are given before us. How will you and I go on together? How will we decide what matters, who has the right to a voice, who can make decisions about things like how important is our environment, health, homelessness, education and the way we talk about and carry our differences? What tools will we use to discern all of this, how will we use

them, who will have the right to pick them up and put them down? Who will we hear and who will turn away from, our ears deaf? And when Gary and I refused each other empathy, when we refuse each other empathy, who are we then? What are the consequences to our day, our peace, our beauty, our capacity to love and give love to others?

It matters so much less where we sleep and if there are bugs there than it does about how we discuss sleeping with bugs. Who do we blame? Are we kind to one another as we swat those bugs or do we turn away from one another? Do we devise ways to protect ourselves alone or do we listen to what is happening for the other? Do we sleep at all and wake with a new plan or do we stay awake all night talking about how one of us should have done better at making a bugless plan?

How we live in this world full of bugs and beauty is what matters, not that there are bugs and beauty.

It is the time in our service now for Joys and Concerns, one of the ways that we show empathy and friendship to one another here, by listening, by sharing in another's joy and sorrow, often one right beside the other, by leaving room for all of our humanity to live here and to be witnessed.

---

## **Eros and Giving**

The poem Phaedra picked to read by Jeffrey McDaniel can be seen as an interpretation of eros. Plato argues that eros is an initial erotic feeling for a person, but with contemplation it can become an appreciation for the beauty within that person, or even an appreciation for beauty itself in an ideal sense. As Plato expresses it, eros can help the soul to "remember" beauty in its pure form. It follows from this for Plato, that eros can contribute to an understanding of truth.

Gary and I were so struck in India with the amount of touching between men and men and women and women (rarely did we see men and women touching). Police men would walk holding hands with their male friends. Military men would walk arm in arm with other men in uniform. Everywhere one looked, boys and boys and girls and girls, women and women and men and men, were holding hands, helping each other dress, arranging one another's hair, or picking something out of it, feeding one another, guiding each other across the street, up the stairs, into or out of a rickshaw, around a dangerous pathway.

People were always touching, stacked 10 into a small vehicle, 8 of them hanging on for dear life on the back of a truck, shoulder to shoulder, 5 on a bicycle, 6 in a cart being pushed by another 3...everywhere people were touching and caring for one another, giving to one another.

Gary and I noticed, without correlating it to this at first, also how gentle so many of the people were, how slow to anger, to react, to lash out, to lean out of a car or rickshaw or taxi and chastise another. The people were more at peace in and with one another. Eros, a willingness and ability to be simply touched which helps the soul remember beauty in its

pure form, that helps one understand truth. And we were told over and over again that the truth the Indian people understand is that they are all connected, one to each other and to something greater than one another too: some higher understanding, good or divine love.

I have reflected with some of you on what it is to give and how in our culture we seem to be afraid of giving, to be afraid that if we give too much we will be afraid of being taken advantage of, that there will be no end to the asking and the expectations. We hold in and hold off and we do not reach out and are not touched and sometimes withhold our touch too. I wonder if these are connected, the willingness to be touched and the willingness to give? Maybe touch softens us into believing that we will still be loved as we give, that we will still have enough as we give, that we will still be here as we give, that we will still be seen as we give.

Giving is an act of love, maybe an erotic act. To give is to take something of ourselves and make it part of something or someone else. May we be blessed with the courage to grow ourselves in this way. May we be blessed with the kindness of touch to teach us this particular kind of courage.

## **Agape**

In *agape*, humanity does not merely express its nature, but transcends it. *Agape* identifies with the interests of [another] the with no expectation of reciprocity.<sup>1</sup>

It is love for the sake of love, love because to love is what is left to do. The early Christians also used the word Agape to describe a love feast. They described the last supper as agape. Paul Collins chose a poem, Mother by Zbigniew Herbert to offer us an aspect of agape.

At the orphanage in India, the children loved each other and their pets and their 'mothers' or the women who cared for them, and the stranger, me and Gary, in this case, in a way I have never seen before. These children came from very difficult places, places of great lack, starvation, disease, abuse, depravation before they arrived at the Unitarian Annie Margaret Barr Children's Village where we stayed with them. They had no reason to be those who could teach me what love without expectation of reciprocity was, what love because love was what there is left to do -was.

And yet they taught me more about love than I have ever known. One day, we were tasked, us girls, with sweeping the long driveway leading to the orphanage because some special guests were coming.

We all got out brooms, or twigs tied together with string and started sweeping the dirt of leaves and sticks (which would be covered with them again when the wind and rain came the next day).

---

<sup>1</sup> *Church Dogmatics IV.2*, as translated by G. W Bromiley (1958), p. 745.

One of the littlest girls, Alisha, 6 years old, about whom I have spoken several times, always worked harder than any of us, and she jumped down into a culvert to clear the leaves in there and cut herself on something in there. The other girls saw this and tsk, tsked her and helped her out (she did not cry or even wince). They took her back to the house and took off her filthy clothes which one of them brought them down to the river to wash, 20 minutes away. They washed her and brushed her hair, which she allowed. I found a band aid and she let me put it on her, though with some hesitation.

This whole band of girls was no more than 12 years old. No one ever cared for them like this. They mothered here, these little motherless ones.

There is a saying in the bible, "Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me." Alisha is not the least, but she is the littlest. And this *me* in the bible, is all of us I think. What you did for me, this universal *me*, you did for the heart of all of us that is small and hurt and broken and old and closed and forgotten and jaded and thinks there can be no changing those who are broken.

We can change. We do all the time. Little Alisha came to that village unable to be touched only 5 months before. Now, she is the center of a love fest. Agape. To love because love is what is left to do. To mother because we are all mothers. Amen and Happy Mother's Day!

---