

Love Is
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First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany
February 1, 2026

Chalice Lighting

Your task is not to seek love,
but merely to seek and find all the barriers within yourself
that you have built against it.

- Jalāl ad-Dīn Mohammad Rūmī, as interpreted by Coleman Barks

Reading: 1 Corinthians 13: 1-8, 13

Sermon

For most of my life, I have really disliked that reading. In part, that's because of all the other problematic biblical passages attributed to Paul – I'm predisposed to dislike it. But mostly, I think, it's because the only place I ever heard it was at weddings. I know people who find it inspiring in that context. I find it disturbing. I believe in the importance of Love – that's all good. But I also hear a message about what love is supposed to look like - that if you love someone, you won't set your own boundaries - whatever happens, you'll bear it and hope, believe and endure. And that there is merit in that endurance, that this is what love calls us to do.

Whatever else love may be, that is not love. Love itself may have no boundaries, but love as made concrete in the actions of humans absolutely does. The false equating of love with endless self-sacrifice, even if it destroys us, has done a lot of damage.

Love manifests in many different ways, but patient endurance or self-sacrifice by the most vulnerable, or to the point of harm, is not love. Harkening back to a service we offered in October, Love in human relationships looks like a generous heart and healthy boundaries.

So, turning to that 1 Corinthians passage for marital guidance didn't sit well with me. But eventually, I learned that, in its context, that's not what it's about.

For one thing, Paul wasn't talking about romantic love, or familial love. In fact, I imagine he might be pretty surprised to find this passage in weddings 2000 years later. The word that was translated into English as "love" was (in the original Greek) *agape*. In a language with a host of different words for the various forms of love, *agape* wasn't about spousal relationships – it referred to a kind of all-encompassing, spiritual love – the love of humans for the holy or God, or the love of God for humans; or we might speak of the love of humans for all beings, or the love of the Earth or all that is.

Unitarian Universalism takes that kind of larger love seriously. We often speak of the "love that holds all" or that "will not let us go" - a love that is available to us in even the most difficult times; even when we mess up; even when we're hurting. Unitarian Universalism is rooted in an

understanding that there is, in some way, a love that is that big. And you are loved. No matter what.

Whether or not you feel loved at this moment, whether or not you are experiencing this kind of benevolence in the universe, this is a powerful, and hopeful, stance. It affirms that you matter - each of us matters. It's an expression of faith that a love that is bigger than any of us can manage exists. And it's a call to orient ourselves and our lives toward that love. There's an accountability, to be in the world in life-giving ways.

Love Is. You are loved. And we are called into that love – to participate in it, to embody love in this world.

But we don't have to. I've heard it said that love is like a river. It's there, whether we pay attention to it or not. We can be so focused on something else that we don't see it at all. We can choose to look away. We can stay on the shore and admire it from afar. Or we might dip our toe in it, or wade in part-way. Or perhaps ... take the plunge, and flow with it wherever it leads. The river is always there. What we do about it is up to us.

But let's return to the reading. It's not surprising that an early Christian would talk about this kind of Love. Jesus's teachings are full of it, both in that larger abstract sense and in its concrete implications. Love for him was radically inclusive, anti-hierarchical, and actively resistant to consumerism and the tyranny of empire. It looked like caring for the suffering and the most vulnerable. It looked like resisting abuses of power through non-compliance. It looked like building a different kind of community ... and world.

It looked a lot like the recent actions of ordinary people in Minneapolis, coming together to resist the abuses of ICE in their community.

So the language used and the religious framework give some context for Paul's words. And there's more.

This letter was written to a struggling religious community. They were trying to figure out their purpose and identity as a people with core values that were different from what they saw in the wider world, and who were oppressed by the powerful in that world. Theirs was also a very diverse church – bringing together people who didn't often mingle, Jews and Gentiles, different ethnicities, men, women and children of various ranks - including some who were enslaved. Such diversity holds great religious promise, but it also brings challenges. The people in Corinth were trying to build their community, and it was not going well. They disagreed about what they should do, and how they should do it. They argued, they blamed each other – their divisions were tearing them apart.

1 Corinthians was Paul's attempt to get them back on track, and take this community into the future. Most of the letter is in the weeds – full of detailed instructions. It's highly unlikely I will ever read those parts to you – a lot of it is not consistent with my understanding of religious community – if your exposure to the Christian bible has been limited, don't start with Paul. But in the middle of all that is this little piece about love. This is love, he said. It's bigger than you and all those problems. It's more important than all the dos and don'ts, and the things we argue about. And you, people of Corinth, should pay more attention to love.

I can only imagine how that might have been received. Here are people with serious problems, who care about their community, who are under physical threat, and Paul tells them to work on Love. Not to create Love – Love already is – not even to find it - the river is right here - but to do something about all the things that are getting in the way.

“You don’t have to seek love, merely the barriers within yourself that you have built against it.”

But oh those barriers.

They had them in Corinth. Paul named a few: envy, arrogance, impatience; focusing too much on knowledge and possessions and being right.

And, we have some, too. We all have them. Perhaps there’s a deep hurt that we just can’t forgive. Or the pain of a loss that we don’t know what to do with.

There may be barriers of ‘ways of being’ that we’ve picked up along the way, from our families or the wider world. Or perhaps barriers we’ve created to protect ourselves – that also keep love at a distance.

And the biggest barrier of all – the one that’s at the root of so many of the others: Fear.

Fear of the pain happening again. Fear of our own inadequacies revealed to the world. Fear of mistakes, ridicule, being taken advantage of, becoming overwhelmed. Fear of loss. Fear of harm - to ourselves or someone we love. Fear that what we cling to for security in a confusing out-of-control world might turn out to be more ephemeral than we ever imagined, or than we can deal with.

As Unitarian Universalist minister and author Forrest Church said, “Hate is not love’s opposite. Fear is. When we are frightened – by others, by life itself – we cannot love. We can hide,” he says. “We can fight. But we cannot love.”¹

In that community in Corinth, there would have been fear. Including the very imminent fear of physical harm, and the loss of their community.

We have our fears, too. Perhaps fears about what’s going on in our world – fear that we or our neighbors are not going to be OK, fear that our democracy might be lost. And we all come here with our own personal fears. It’s worth taking a moment to name them, at least to ourselves.

The truth that Paul managed to insert amid … all the rest of the words, was that **religious community is first and foremost about practicing love** – finding ways around the barriers between us and that river, so we remember that we are loved, and hear the call to act with love, to become a more life-giving presence with one another and in the world.

In practice, this means that what we do matters. And **how we are with each other as we do the thing matters even more**. Even when the situation is dire and the work is urgent.

So it has been, and is now. This is what we’re here for – not to create or seek love, but to do something about those barriers so we can be Love.

It starts, I think, with noticing the river – the ways in which Love is already here - in your actions and those of the people around you. The Love that brings meals where they’re needed, that

¹ Forrest Church, *The Cathedral of the World: A Universalist Theology*, 103-4.

listens, that builds community with our young people and with us all, for there is Love in details done well; the love that shares our various gifts when we gather; the Love in forbearance and kind boundary-setting; the Love in our commitment when we mess up and choose to try again. And the Love that persists in the work of ending oppression.

The awfulness grabs our attention. But Love is here in all those ways.

Then, after noticing, perhaps explore ... what does that Love ask of us – how are we called to engage with that river? How might we give of ourselves in meaningful, but not self-destructive ways, in the service of care, and justice in the world – while paying as much attention to how we do things as to what we do?

And finally, notice the barriers – what is getting in the way for you? For us? What makes it hard to jump in? Here in this community, we can sometimes find the courage to speak of our fears and shortcomings, for ours is a faith that tells us that we are so much more than these. Notice your barriers. Notice our barriers. Speak of them, perhaps. And maybe, they'll become just a little more permeable, so we might go deeper into that river together.

Suppose you're on the Albany UU Democracy Crisis Response email list, and every week you get the bulletin, chock full of things you can do. You might begin by just noticing the love that shows up as creating each of those opportunities, and then curating and sharing them with you. And then, what engagement is calling to you? You don't have to do them all, but what piece of this might you participate in, with love? And finally, what is getting in the way?

It matters. Your entry into that river may feel like a small act, but it is not.

As we're seeing in Minnesota, and elsewhere, ordinary people who choose Love have the power – together - to shape the future - whether in work for justice, or in our relationships, or in anything else we do.

And life goes better when (at least sometimes) we ask:

Where do we see love now?

What is love calling us to do?

And what is getting in the way of being more loving? Can we speak of it? Can we do something about it?

As it was long ago, so it is today – tuning in to the quiet song of Love is what gets us through the hard times, keeps us together, and turns barriers into possibilities.

As it was then, may it be so now.

Amen