

How Do I Love Thee

Sermon by Toni Maddi

Preached at Unity Temple Unitarian Universalist Congregation in Oak Park, Illinois

October 11, 2009

The pastoral associates, Jean Borrelli, Amelia Dellos, Tom Dunnington, Deb Quantock McCarey and I, meet monthly to discuss how we can be of use to the congregation and of comfort to individual members. We also have regular learning sessions to grow as individuals and as a team. Last spring we all took the Myers-Briggs type indicator which is an assessment questionnaire designed to measure psychological preferences in how people perceive the world and make decisions. These preferences were extrapolated from the typological theories of Carl Jung, as published in his book *Psychological Types*. The developers of the personality inventory were Katharine Cook Briggs and her daughter, Isabel Briggs Myers. Their initial efforts grew into the current Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, which focuses on the value of identifying our natural differences. It has been called "the world's most widely used personality assessment." It divides personalities into sixteen types and makes distinctions such as introversion versus extroversion and sensing versus intuition.

Of course, we tailored our focus to our group as pastoral associates and one of the things we learned was that not all of us like to be comforted in the same way. Some of us feel comforted by a hug and others (that would be me) aren't physically demonstrative except with people we know exceptionally well. Some people like condolences expressed in person, a visit or an offer to go out for a cup of coffee, or, at the very least, a phone call. Others prefer a card or having a meal brought over.

Two years ago our house was in a car accident. I make light of it, but there was nothing funny about it. A seventeen-year-old young man, who had just gotten his

learner's permit, was driving his father home from a party. Due to a number of circumstances, the car literally drove up the front of our house, flew across the sidewalk, hit the tree on the parkway six feet up, flipped and landed on its roof. The father died instantly. The son not only lived, but was charged with reckless homicide among other things. This shook our family up both literally and figuratively. The stucco fell off our house, windows were broken and the house was almost pushed off its foundation. But far worse were the emotional repercussions. Logically, of course, I knew that our house didn't jump out into the street and cause the accident. But it's hard not to feel at least twinges of guilt, especially when feeling so helpless. A family was devastated. A young man's life was changed. All this — in our front yard — and yet what could we do to ease the pain of this family? We were in a state of emotional shock ourselves and the arms of our friends in this congregation opened up to us. Many people called. I recognized the calls and offers of help as the loving gestures they were and I was thankful for them (and hopefully gracious), but they weren't what *I* needed. I didn't want to talk. I process things internally. And once I'm done processing them, I let them go for the most part, no need to talk once I've worked through it.

Gary Chapman takes these individual differences one step further in his book *The Five Love Languages*. He says, "Your emotional love language and the language of [the person you're expressing love to] may be as different as Chinese and English. If [the other person] understands only Chinese, you will never know how to love each other." He posits that there are five primary love languages. There may be dialects, so to speak, within each language, just as English and Chinese have dialects, but we need to be fluent in the five main languages. Those languages are: words of affirmation, quality time, receiving gifts, acts of service and physical touch.

Words of affirmation are compliments, “I love your hair like that!,” encouragement, “You should write a book; your stories are so funny!”, appreciation and thanks, “Thanks for being there for me. I know I can always count on you.”

I remember a story Fern Stanley told while she was our interim minister. She told the story of a woman, a mother with grown daughters, who complained bitterly every Thanksgiving about how much work making the dinner was. The daughters offered to host, the daughters offered to help, but the mother refused all their offers and continued to complain. The daughters figured she enjoyed complaining, gritted their teeth and suffered through each Thanksgiving. Until one year one of the daughters decided to try something different. When her mother started in on how many stores she had to go to to get the ingredients for the stuffing, the daughter said, “I love that you always make chestnut stuffing. It’s a family tradition.” The mother looked a little surprised and then started talking about how *her* mother had made chestnut stuffing. When the mother started to gripe about how many potatoes she had had to peel, the daughter praised the mashed potatoes and asked her mother how she got all the lumps out. By the end of the dinner, having heard her love language spoken, the mother was almost purring. *Her* primary language was words of affirmation.

The second language is quality time. This is my primary love language. The truth of it hit me hard. When I was married to my practice husband, he decided to go to massage therapy school shortly after our son was born. While I was pregnant with our daughter, he decided to supplement his education with a nursing degree. When he graduated from nursing school, he took two full-time jobs. Although I was married, I was, in effect, a single parent. I tried to explain to my husband what I needed, but he couldn’t understand. So I decided that if I had to be a single parent, I wanted to date.

I filed for divorce. It's important to me that my husband and friends spend time with me building memories for later.

The third love language is receiving gifts. A gift is something you can hold and treasure. It's a visual symbol. You can look at it later and still feel the love instilled in it. It doesn't matter if it cost money. Those of you who are parents, do you remember the time your child brought you a flower or a drawing or a rock? Rocks were my son's gift of choice and I still have them. Do you remember a friend bringing you a small souvenir from a trip, something that said, "I was thinking of you while I was away."? On the old Dick Van Dyke show, receiving gifts was the primary love language of the son, Richie. Every day when Rob would come home from work Richie would ask, "What did you bring me?" And even a paperclip elicited an "Oh, boy!"

The fourth language is acts of service. Many people, women and mothers in particular, think this is their primary love language because they are always doing things for others — making a costume, organizing a card-signing for a co-worker's birthday, baking cookies for after the school concert. I would have thought that was my main language. But although I appreciate having things done for me, it's not how I feel most loved. And although I may spend a great deal of time doing things for others, I'm not necessarily expressing love by doing them.

The story of Jesus washing his disciples' feet is a powerful illustration of showing love through acts of service. It was Passover, right before Jesus was killed. In that era it was the servants' job to wash the guests' feet as they arrived, since they wore sandals, lived in a dusty place and walked a lot. Not only did a servant not wash the disciples' feet, Jesus did it and he encouraged his disciples to follow his example. To me, this

story is not so much about humbling oneself as it is about showing love. Actions speak louder than words.

The last love language is physical touch. We all know the importance of touch and have read of the studies that show that children who are held, hugged and kissed are emotionally healthier than those who are left for long periods without physical contact. And it's a large component of romantic love. Whatever there is of us, it resides in the body. Touching communicates messages even to strangers as we shake hands when we meet, or hug in times of crisis. Although I'm not a physically demonstrative person, I try to accept the love and friendship being offered by a hug. I wasn't always able to do that.

To discover your primary love language, ask yourself, How do I express love to others? What do I complain about most often about others? and What do I request most often from others?

It's important to know our primary love language, but it's equally important to know how the people in our lives feel loved and express love. We want to be able to communicate our feelings in a way they'll understand and we should appreciate their expressions of love even if they're not in the form *we* prefer.

Love requires a giver and a receiver, but the giver or the receiver doesn't necessarily have to be a person. How do we worship and express love to the Divine? How do we experience Divine love? We can express love to and feel love from God in our preferred style once we know what that style is.

If your preferred love language is words of affirmation, you can keep a gratitude journal, praise the Divine in prayer or in singing or follow King David's example. David was the second King of Israel and he wrote seventy-three of the psalms that are in the Old Testament. Julia Cameron, who many of you may know from her plays, musicals, poetry, fiction and non-fiction, most notably *The Artist's Way*, says she writes love letters to God. She says,

I think God is like everybody else. Phone calls are fine, but it's nice to get a letter once in a while. I write to God a lot. I sit down and scrawl out "dear God and higher Forces," and then I report in. Sometimes it feels like a field report, like I'm writing home from the front... Other times, it's a little less pitched, "I'm missing John and I am hoping you are taking good care of him. I don't have anybody to talk to about my dreams right now and it's making me sad. Could you look around for a friend for me?"

Sometimes my letters are entitled: "You know what would make me really happy? Hint-hint." Other times they are flora and fauna reports: "The neighbor on my left has a rose the size of a saucer with crimson edging that's pretty fancy." (In case God hadn't noticed).

When I'm in a funk or a snit, I can resist writing God. I can go radio silent and figure "God knows anyway." Actually, I am sulking and I do a lot better when I take pen to page and gripe. "Dear God, Is this hellish mess for my spiritual advancement? I am finding it pretty ungroovy and I am out of ideas about it, so send some, would you?"

I do a lot of "send some" prayers, which I have been told are the lowly prayer form "Gimme-gimme," but I know with my own daughter, I like giving her things and if she is muddling along without something and not asking, I sometimes get mad. "Why didn't you tell me what you needed?"

That's easy!" I have a hunch that God gets a kick out of helping just like I do.

... My experience of God is of a benevolent, listening, interactive Something, and when I communicate with It, I feel better. For all I know, the letters may pile up unopened, but writing them is good for me—and it certainly feels like they get read.

For me, I feel affirmed through and connected to The Holy through beauty, not simply cosmetic beauty, but the more complicated beauty of truth and life and love.

There are texts, writing by folks like Anne Lamott, Mary Oliver, Starhawk, Oriah ... I hear the voice of The Divine calling to me through their words and I feel affirmed and loved.

Rhonda Byrne, the author of *The Secret*, speaks affirmingly in her book that has been on the best seller list for years now. She says,

You are God in a physical body. You are Spirit in the flesh. You are Eternal Life expressing itself as You. You are a cosmic being. You are all power. You are all wisdom. You are all intelligence. You are perfection. You are magnificence. You are the creator, and you are creating the creation of You on this planet (p. 164)."

If your preferred language is quality time, you can spend time with the Divine walking in nature or walking a labyrinth or reading. Since quality time is my language, I like to make spending quality time with God part of my routine. I spend a part of many mornings in meditation, prayer, and contemplation. I find

it easy to feel loved this way. I spend quality time with the Divine and the Divine shows up to spend time with me.

Although I suspect that Mother Teresa's preferred love language was acts of service, she taught me a lot about prayer. Once, Dan Rather, the CBS anchor, asked Mother Teresa what she said during her prayers. She answered, "I *listen* to God." So Rather turned the question and asked, "Well then, what does God say?" To that Mother Teresa smiled with confidence and answered, "He listens, too."

If your primary love language is gifts, there are many gifts to give to and receive from God. There are gifts of money, gifts of meeting the physical needs of others with food, shelter and clothing, the gift of music. I can't speak for anyone and I'm sure people give for a number of reasons. It takes many people and talents to make a community, any community, run. Perhaps some people give because someone was there for them and they're paying it forward or because they enjoy it, or they believe that each dollar they give will be returned to them by the Universe. But I'm sure many do it as a form of worship, a way to express love to the Divine.

What does the the Holy give us? The song of a bird. The beauty of an autumn day. Wisdom. Talent. Healing. Love. These things are given freely to everyone.

The New Testament also speaks of gifts from God in the sixth chapter of Matthew (Matthew 6:26-30):

Look at the birds in the air. They don't plant or harvest or store food in barns, but your heavenly Father feeds them. And you know that you are

worth much more than the birds. You cannot add any time to your life by worrying about it. And why do you worry about clothes? Look at how the lilies in the field grow. They don't work or make clothes for themselves. But I tell you that even Solomon with his riches was not dressed as beautifully as one of these flowers. God clothes the grass in the field, which is alive today but tomorrow is thrown into the fire. So you can be even more sure that God will clothe you.

A well-known example of someone whose primary love language was acts of service is Mother Teresa. As a teenager she joined a Catholic youth group in her hometown in Albania. When she was eighteen, she moved to Ireland to join the Sisters of Our Lady of Loreto. Three months later she was sent to Kolkata and then to Darjeeling where, in 1937, she took her permanent vows and the name Teresa. She started out teaching in a school for well-to-do girls, but after nine years she found another calling. She left the convent and went to live among the poor. She worked with abandoned children living in city parks, teaching them the basics of hygiene and teaching them the alphabet. She said, "In determining which work would be done, there was no planning at all. I headed the work in accordance with how I felt called by the people's sufferings. God made me see what He wanted me to do." To consider Mother Teresa an unusually altruistic person is to miss the central message of her life. The central dimension of her acts of service was spiritual in nature. To her, loving God meant serving people.

We can serve the Divine by serving people through Habitat for Humanity, Goodwill Industries, being hospice or food depository volunteers. The pastoral associates offer spiritual support to members of the congregation who need an

extra friend during difficult times while the caring committee tends to more physical needs. The religious education teachers and coffee hour providers and B.A.G. day workers are all offering acts of service.

And finally there is the language of physical touch. Have you seen people who close their eyes and raise their hands when they sing hymns? They are most likely people who worship the Divine and feel Holy presence through physical touch. In August, our ministerial intern from last year, Michael, did a service on Taizé. He said, “When I pray with Taizé, I *feel* the resonance of sharing with others.” Some people pray and feel a burden has been lifted from them; others use phrases such as “feel the hand of God” or “touched by an angel.” We UUs tend to be a contemplative bunch and we’re not like the “holy roller” churches where people dance in the aisles yelling “Halleluiaah!” and women wave handkerchiefs saying, “Thank you, Jesus!” We do have Nick Page come in every now and then to help us feel the love of the Divine, but I doubt our congregation could sustain that level of emotion week after week. And, although some members are huggy, how many of us are comfortable hugging or shaking hands with street people, sex offenders, people with physical deformities, people with mental disorders, or the spiritually cultish? Many of these people are in need of physical touch because society shuns them. Loving through physical touch can be powerful and physically touching those who may not experience human touch very often can be especially meaningful. As I said earlier, I’m not physically demonstrative, but while I worked in hospice, I made a point to show genuine caring through touch.

I believe that God is love. I believe that the energy that holds us and the universe together is love. There are those who claim to act in the name of God

who commit atrocities. There are those who work for social justice and help make our world a better place who never mention God and yet spread love. Wherever they go, love prevails. There is a difference between religiously motivated love and divinely motivated love. May we all be divinely inspired and driven to worship in the way that fits us best. And may we all feel the embrace of the Divine in the way we most prefer, so that we may know that we are truly loved.

So indeed may it ever be. Amen.

Benediction

May we be blessed by each others' presence. May we be a comfort to each other, sharers of each other's joys, consolers in each other's sorrows, helpers to each other in all the vicissitudes of life. May we encourage each other in whatever we set out to achieve. May we, trusting each other, trust life and not be afraid. Let us carry the joy of Divine presence deep in our hearts to support us as we return to the world. Go in peace. Amen.