

“Love, Actually”

a Sermon Delivered by Rev. Tamara Lebak, Associate Minister
at All Souls Unitarian Church, Sunday, February 14, 2010

Happy Valentine’s Day! Today, in Unitarian Universalist churches across the country, we are tackling the idea of re-imagining Valentine’s Day. On the one hand, I want to tell you I am one sappy romantic. I have seen *When Harry Met Sally*, *Casablanca*, and *Annie Hall* so many times that I can nearly quote them all word for word. And I have never been one to allow myself to feel excluded from the goo of Valentine’s Day. So I need to confess, I did participate in what would be considered the normal part of this holiday. I bought a card and a rose and even some jewelry for Jill. (This Valentine’s Day felt exceptionally special to us because it is our last before the baby is born.)

When I discovered that Valentine’s Day landed on a Sunday this year, I became very interested in looking at the history of this tradition. Now before looking at why I would want to re-imagine it at all, I first wanted to dig deeper into what it is in the first place. Based on the majority of the messages we receive about Valentine’s Day, it appears to be mostly reserved for those who are intimately involved in a culturally-approved way. And culturally-approved *out in the world* is quite different than inside the bubble of All Souls. So what about those who are single, widowed, divorced, or gay? Is there room on this holiday for more than a Hallmark romance? Why *do* we have a day when we celebrate romantic love?

St. Valentine was not always a saint. And when you hear that title you know that there is a story *behind the man* that implies a deep commitment to his values. *Saint* is a term used, mostly by Christians, that identifies an exceptional teacher, an exemplary model, a person who works wonders, a person of selfless or ascetic behavior, *or* someone who possesses a special revelation about the Holy.

First you need to know there is more than one St. Valentine. The one most frequently associated with February 14th is Valentine of Terni. The history and the lore are very intertwined, and frankly quite difficult to decipher. You also need to know that the historians during the medieval period of history painted with a very broad brush, embellishing to support an idea of chivalry that, along with the Renaissance, still influences our American sense of romance today.

Valentine was a priest in the 3rd century under the Roman Empire. The story goes that this emperor, believing single men made better soldiers, made it illegal for soldiers to marry. (Interestingly, today, some 1700 years after Valentine, we are in the midst of a reassessment of *Don't Ask Don't Tell* in our own military.) Valentine found this idea of married vs. unmarried soldiers

to be absurd, and despite the law, secretly married the men to their beloveds. Eventually, his resistance was discovered and St. Valentine was jailed. While in jail, as the story goes, he fell in love with his jailer's blind daughter. (Another no-no for a priest.) And also while in jail, Valentine supposedly healed her of her blindness. Lastly, it has been said that Valentine, before his execution, he wrote a letter to his no-longer-sight-impaired beloved professing his affections, and signed it "Your Valentine."

Maybe we could all use a yearly reminder of those who have resisted the status quo in the name of love. Maybe once a year we could all use a little cure from our own blindness – our blindness to the fact that love *is* actually all around us – and we are, in fact, its messengers.

Now, as is expected, early Christians were, of course, infamous for usurping other pagan holidays and Valentine's Day is no exception. A local festival in Ancient Rome, Lupercalia, was observed February 13 through 15, and was an archaic rite connected to fertility. And in the ancient Athenian calendar, the period between mid-January and mid-February was the month of Gamelion, dedicated to the sacred marriage of Zeus and Hera. This pagan holiday was focused more on sacrifice than romantic love.

The idea of love and sacrifice is an important one. I often include in my marriage and commitment ceremonies, a reference to what I believe to be the connection between committed love and religion. As I say in these services,

Saint-Exupery writes: "Love does not consist in gazing at each other, but in looking outward, together in the same direction, uniting in the same high effort." The secret of marriage is similar to that of religion itself; it is the emergence of a larger self. It is the finding more of one's life by losing a small part of it. Such is the privilege of those who bond in union together: to each be his or herself, and yet also to be another. A covenantal relationship, marriage is the privilege to face the world: strong with the strength of two, wise with the wisdom of two, and brave with the courage of two.

That is what commitment does. That is what community does. It forces us to make choices based on our vows – our covenants – what we profess to value in this world.

In my social justice work, I have been inspired by many catholic nuns. You may not know this, but many of them wear a wedding ring. Even though they are not permitted to marry, they wear a ring to show that they are betrothed to the church. They are essentially married to God and the service of humanity. Some would even say they are married to Jesus. The ring is normally given when the sister professes her vows. Some orders pass down the rings of women in the order who have come before them. Some have special engravings on the rings connecting them to their order.

And even though these women are set apart from the world in that way, by not being allowed to marry an earthly partner, I find this kind of dedication immensely inspiring. One sister who was a teacher once told me that she couldn't imagine it any other way. "There is too much work to do," she'd say. Because she has no family or husband, she can make time for her students, for her work, for her prayers. I respect that. There are so many choices to be made from such an infinite number of possibilities, how do we choose to **be** in the world? How do we choose to spend our life? For the nuns, one very important choice has been made for them. And I can imagine how it would help them focus – how it might be a relief to a certain extent.

Our values and commitments ought to dictate how we spend our time. And if how you spend your time is accidental rather than intentional, then the question to ask yourself is, "how does your schedule reflect what you value?" What if your day planner or your calendar program was the only artifact we had of your life? What does it say about who you are? What does it say about what you value in this world? About what you find worth living for?

The religious leadership of the Free Church is quite a different matter than that of the Catholics. We do not have such stipulations on our personal lives. Some would argue that this is liberating, and for others, I can imagine, it is more of a burden. Even though ministers in the Free Church have been set apart, to a certain degree, by having dedicated a significant portion of our lives to religious study, we still live *among* the people. We still live according to the same laws, and with the same distractions. Now obviously I did not choose to be a nun, for a variety of reasons, but one thing in particular that appeals to me about our religious leadership, is that we have to learn how to integrate our religious lives and our personal commitments. So a pervading question in everyone's ministry in our tradition is balance. *How in fact do we maintain our religious life at the center AND live out our commitments to a partner, a family, a job?* I personally want to be ministered to by someone who struggles with, and lives this question. *How do we remain faithful to God, to ourselves, to our values, to our commitments and to humanity?* It is a daily struggle.

I am reminded at every choice about how I spend my day, when I come home, when I stay late. And you might already be thinking that question for me is about to become even more complicated, as I become more and more pregnant. Two things especially concern me about the future. 1- As time goes on will I be able to make it through the service without having to leave during a hymn to take a trip to the restroom? And 2- it becomes more and more clear to me that both metaphorically and even quite literally (like it or not) the center of my life is being taken over by this child – along with my center of gravity! Fortunately, nature has worked in some time to get used to this idea, and the progression is gradual. It is, in fact, like a walking metaphor. I literally have

found myself leading with my belly, to get out of bed, or a chair, even when I walk. She is already taking over my center. And I know that doesn't end after she is born. But I do not see this as something that will separate me from God, or the church, or from you. I see it as a means to connect – something that will bring us closer together. (Even though I will be making even tougher choices about how I spend my time to appropriately reflect what I value most in this world.)

I have two primary vows that I believe will guide me on this journey ahead. One is represented by my chosen last name. That reminds me everyday what grounds me. For those of you who do not know, I discovered *lebak* while reading a translation of The Lord's Prayer by Sufi mystic and scholar Neil Douglas Klotz. *Lebak* literally jumped off the page. In Aramaic, *lebak* means heart, the center of one's life, compassion, and audacity. I chose *lebak* as my last name as a guidepost. To be reminded every time I say or sign my name, what is at the center of my life. I wanted to be reminded to be compassionate, to lead with my heart. Reminded to ask myself over and over and over again what am I valuing? What is at the center of my life? I wanted to be reminded that risks from that center are most often worth taking.

And the other symbol that will guide me on this journey to balance my commitments is the rings that Jill and I wear. Upon each is engraved, "Faithless to none, faithful to one." Where we vowed in our own commitment to one another that it would not be at the exclusion of God or our service to humanity.

What if Valentine's Day was instead about commitment? Not only to our beloved, or to God, but to love itself? Rev. Carter Heyward, Episcopal Priest and Theologian said,

Love is active, effective, a matter of making reciprocal and mutually beneficial relation with one's friends and enemies. Love creates righteousness, or justice, here on earth. As advocates and activists for justice know, loving involves struggle, resistance, risk. People working today on behalf of women, [minorities], lesbians and gay men, the aging, the poor in this country and elsewhere know that making justice is not a warm, fuzzy experience. I think also that lovers and good friends know that the most compelling relationships demand hard work, patience, and a willingness to endure tensions and anxiety in creating mutually empowering bonds. For this reason loving involves commitment. [And in this way] Love is a choice — not simply, or necessarily, a rational choice, but rather a willingness to be present to others without pretense or guile. Love is a conversion to humanity — a willingness to participate with others in the healing of a broken world and broken lives. Love is the choice to experience life as a member of the human family, a partner in the dance of life, rather than as an alien in the world or as a deity above the world, aloof and apart from human flesh.

So, what if this holiday were about making the choice to stand up for love? In Rev. Martin Luther King Junior's 1967 address to the anti-war group *Clergy and Laity* he said:

When I speak of love I am not speaking of some sentimental and weak response. I am speaking of that force which all of the great religions have seen as the supreme unifying principle of life. Love is somehow the key that unlocks the door which leads to ultimate reality.

This Hindu, Muslim, Christian, Jewish, Buddhist belief about ultimate reality is beautifully summed up in the first epistle of Saint John:

Let us love one another; for love is God and everyone that loves is born of God and knows God.

What if this holiday was about resistance? Standing on the side of love even when it is difficult? What would love require of us? It would require that we harness its power to stop oppression by speaking up and acting out with love as often and as loudly as we can when the situation arises. The world desperately needs people of faith – people of *our* faith – to speak up and change the tone of the conversation in the public square. And on the beach, and in grade schools, and in the military, and in the voting booth, and everywhere we go, whether you are eight years old or eighty years old.

Love is our gospel. It is our good news. But there is no such thing as a message without a messenger.

Why not [as Hafiz suggests] become the one who lives with a full moon in each eye that is always saying, with that sweet moon language, what every other eye in this world is dying to hear?

Last June, the Unitarian Universalist Association launched the *Standing on the Side of Love* campaign. The campaign works with congregations and communities to confront exclusion, oppression, or violence based on identity – whether that identity has to do with sexual orientation, gender identification, immigration status, religion, race, ability, or any other label that society uses to limit their rights. It's about living out that a theology that says *LOVE reigns*.

We can be so proud this Valentine's Day. Marlin is quite literally Standing on the Side of Love in what I believe to be its truest form. He is standing up *on behalf of all of us*, for our partner church in Uganda and Rev. Mark Kiyimba, as he risks defending what he believes, "that all people are children of God and God makes no mistakes." Marlin wrote in an update on a blog that you can find on our website:

There are times in our lives when we have to decide, "Here I stand and I can do no other" and sometimes standing on the side of love means risking imprisonment and even death. The Ugandans who are taking this stand, love freedom more than they fear imprisonment or death. Such love is something they learned from Jesus, and there is nothing more dangerous to the status quo than fearless love. They're not asking, "If we do this, what will happen to us?" But, "if we don't support the gay and lesbian community of Uganda and their families, what will happen to them?"

There are times when the church colludes with injustice and evil, like in its support of slavery and racial segregation. In those times, people must rise up to save the church as much as society. This is one of those times. There are moments in life when we have to take risks to support what we believe to be God's will for humanity, and it is my strong belief that God's will is for people to be free.

If you are interested in the atrocities going on in Uganda today, I invite you to read the *NY Times* article this morning about a same sex couple and the gay agenda. It will turn your stomach. Or on the internet you can even read Ugandan newspapers online, like the Daily Monitor.

I have had a lot of people come to me since Marlin's departure and ask, "What can I do?" We cannot all go to Africa... I have said to many of you over the past week, and I firmly believe this to be true. Marlin could not go to Africa without us – without this church – as an institution and as individuals, some who gave their money and the rest of us whom he represents. Our participation in this church locally gives him something to stand for: 1800+ voices whom he represents.

So what can we do? We can educate ourselves. And not turn a blind eye to what is going on in the world. And I invite you to re-imagine Valentine's Day with me. Let this be a day, from now on, when you not only buy tokens of your affection for your significant other. Let this be a day to remind you that every other day of the year it is important to stand on the side of love.

Will you stand with me? And just to make sure in the footage everyone knows you are not standing for a hymn, would you make a heart with your hands? Let's send a message. We can pan the congregation with our camera that records the service, and send a message to Uganda – to the world – that on this Valentine's day, we *stand on the side of love*.

Standing on the side of love calls *us* to be the Valentine for all those excluded, oppressed, for those subjected to violence based on identity. We need not be the martyr, but the resistor. How else can you help? It may be in a letter to your senator or representative, or an editorial about an injustice that you see. It may be an instance of not treating someone equally or as a child of God.

It may simply be in your presence – in a kind word or deed. You don't need to tell everyone in the world that you love them. Although it doesn't hurt. On Valentine's Day let us remember to fall in love with the world. And to *show* those with whom we come in contact that they are beloved. On Valentine's Day let us resist apathy and silence, and recommit to a pervasive, persistent and relentless love for humanity. For ALL SOULS.

Today, be someone's Valentine. Resist hatred and oppression, and stand on the side of love.

Happy Valentine's Day!

Amen.