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For The First Parish of Bolton

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Radical Love

Love is a mystery. And radical love is an extreme mystery, a foundational truth that is incomprehensible to our finite minds. Radical love is love at the root of things, an essential love that lives after all else has evaporated away. Love, radical or not, cannot be completely captured in words. Every expression of it is inadequate. The closest human communication of love that I know is John Coltrane's A Love Supreme and Jetro Da Silva's "For Perry Smith." We could listen to either of these pieces of music, pronounce the benediction and go home knowing that we have heard the music of love.

But words are my medium, and I have set myself the challenge of taking words, multi-faceted jewels of poli-semi, of multiple meanings and stringing them together to say something comprehensible about the incomprehensible. I am not the first to do it, and this is not my first attempt. Human beings have been thinking and writing about love in all its forms since the first lover loved. The Song of Solomon says:

Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm:

for love is strong as death, passion fierce as the grave.

Its flashes are flashes of fire, a raging flame.

Many waters cannot quench love, neither can floods drown it.

If one offered for love all the wealth of one's house, it would be utterly scorned.

(Song of Solomon 8:6-7)

Shakespeare says of love:

It is an ever fixed mark that looks on tempests and is never shaken;

It is a star to every wandering bark whose worth's unknown, although his height
be taken. . .

Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,

But bears it our even to the edge of doom. (Sonnet 116)

Writing of her own love, Elizabeth Barrett Browning says:

I love thee freely, as men strive for Right;

I love thee purely, as they turn from Praise.

I love the with the passion put to use

In my old griefs, and with my childhood's faith. (Sonnet 43)

And she asks of her beloved:

If thou must love me let it be for nought . . .

But love me for love's sake, that evermore

Thou mayest love on, through love's eternity (Sonnet 14)

Nina Simone sings her own lyrics and says:

Should the mountains crumble to ashes
and the rain should cease to fall
and if the river stopped its flowing
you'd still be my all in all
and if the clouds cover the sky
so the sunlight won't come through
then I will never, never, never, never, never tire of loving you.

(Seems I'm Never Tired of Loving You from The Essential Nina Simone)

And from my own writings:

Rejected love exploded H/her heart and blasted fragments of divine, radical love
to the outer edges of the cosmos. . .

And a drop of God's own radical love found me and mingled its love, unmerited
favor, amazing grace with my desolate tears praying prayers of thanksgiving out
of sheer obedience,

And I became large, as expansive as the being and the presence of God's own
shattered, scattered heart.

("Valentine for the Broken Hearted" JustPeaceTheory.com)

Biblical wisdom tells us that God is love. God is the fierce passion that is an unquenchable fire. God is the ever-fixed mark, the guiding star. And when we love, that love is God loving through us. God loves freely, purely and beyond reason. God loves us for love's own sake without regard to time. God never, never, never, never, never, never, tires of loving us. When love comes and goes, God knows our pain and loves the pain away and helps us to understand that love itself is the gift. It is a gift that does not require reciprocation. When we love, it is God giving God's self to us to give away. We are blessed for having loved. This is one radical aspect of the radical love that is God.

Moreover, radical love loves boldly and without shame. The Proverbs teach: "Better is open rebuke than hidden love." (Proverbs 27:5) Radical love-- as distinct from like, lust, need or greed—loves without shame because it is its own justification. Since God is love, love brings us back to the totality, to the unity that is God. Christian theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote of shame. In his theology, shame is a result or our awareness of disunity. We are born singular selves. The work of crafting connections is the meaning of our individual lives. It is the moral work of balancing our responsibilities to ourselves with our responsibilities to others to whom we are connected. Bonhoeffer reminds us: "In shame, man is reminded of his disunion with God and with other men; conscience is the sign of man's disunion with himself" (Ethics 28). Radical love begins with self love and self care. But love is expansive. We love self and the people who love us back, and when love is mature, when love is complete, when it is radical, it reaches to all of creation. This is a restoration of unity.

When we restore the unity through a shameless love, we also free ourselves from judgment. This does not mean that we do not critically assess our own actions on a daily basis. This does not mean that we do not work to live righteous lives and to order our steps according to God's will and word. It does not mean that we accept all behavior of others as moral. It DOES mean that we do not accuse others and pronounce them guilty. Jesus provides us with an instruction guide for radical love in the Sermon on the Mount. He says: "Do not judge, so that you may not be judged. For with what judgment you make you will be judged and the measure you give will be the measure you get" (Matt 7:1-2). We are instructed to be self critical before we are critical of others.

Beyond that, our judgment of others only reveals our own intentionalities. It shows where we choose to place our attention. We cannot see clearly foreground and background at the same time. All cannot be perceived all at once. We each are multiple and complicated. We are yin and yang. We each are good and bad, beautiful and grotesque. What we choose to see in others, what we choose to judge in others is a reflection of what we deem as important. It is a reflection of us. This is why Biblical wisdom teaches: "To the pure all things are pure, but to the corrupt and unbelieving nothing is pure. Their very minds and consciences are corrupted." (Titus 1:15). In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus teaches:"Blessed are the pure in heart for they will see God." (Matt. 5:8) This does not mean we have to wait for physical death to see God. This means that with the eyes of a pure heart, we see God everywhere—in the faces of the people we love and in the faces of our enemies.

Radical love loves even our enemies. We bless them and keep them in our prayers.

We are commanded to love our enemies because we cannot love our enemies and fear them at the same time. Radical love is a shameless love that refuses to judge. At the same time, it is a fearless love. It is fearless because Biblical wisdom also teaches: “God has not given us the spirit of fear, but of power, of love and a sound mind.” (II Timothy 1:7)

This is especially important in these early days of the 21st century. We live in a world with people who want to terrorize us. Violent extremists who give the word radical a bad name, kill thinking they are doing God a favor. They want to keep us afraid. Politicians who need our vote want to keep us afraid. Radical Love says: “Do not believe the hyperbole. Do not fall for the okie doke.” Such would keep us fearful to the point of sanctioning torture, declaring a perpetual war on the world, and giving away our civil liberties. It would cause us to live in suspicion of people who do not look, live, dress, worship or think as we do. Fear is its own torment. The good news is: radical love, extreme love crowds out the fear and torment. So, in radical love there is no shame, no judgment and no fear.

Today is Valentine’s Day. It commemorates St. Valentine, a 3rd century Christian martyr. The legend says that while in prison, awaiting execution, Valentine loved the jailer’s daughter and wrote her a letter. He signed it from your Valentine. Now the day is a day for the expression of love and gifts to the people we love. This Valentine’s Day happens to fall on the Sunday before Ash Wednesday. It is the first day of Shrovetide, the three days before the beginning of Lent. It is Holy Sunday.

Tuesday is Mardi Gras, Fat Tuesday. It is a festival, a carnival that recognizes the human need to party, to eat, drink and be merry. It is akin to the Saturnalia festivals of ancient Rome when the populace partied and was allowed to gamble. Slaves and masters exchanged places for a little while. It was a pressure valve for the society, a structured way for people to party away stress, to forget their troubles for a moment. It also performed the function of social cohesion. Today, Mardi Gras is a day when we gorge ourselves on all the things we plan to fast during Lent. It is a day when we honor life and remember that a balanced life requires both sustenance and joy. A good party is a necessary thing.

And fasting is also a necessary thing. Ash Wednesday is a day of humility and repentance that initiates the season of fasting. Fasting is a discipline. It is an act of radical love that knows both how to give and to give some things up. The Lenten fast teaches us to let go and to let God. It is a fast we fast for the sake of the healing of the world. Biblical wisdom tells us: "If my people who are called by my name will humble themselves and pray, and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land." (II Chronicles 7:14) Fasting is a way to humble ourselves. (Psalm 35:13) However, radical love requires more. It breathes the breath of Holy Spirit on Saint Valentine's Day and expands its meaning from a day we express our love to the people who love us to a day when we remember to love the people who do not. It can also be a day we commit to love an expansive love, an extreme love that loves our enemies whether we tell them so or not.

Radical love breathes the breath of Holy Spirit on Mardi Gras and turns the celebration into a revolutionary moment where the last is first and the first is last, and we resolve to welcome all to life's party. This becomes an act of radical generosity and radical hospitality. Such requires the courage of the open door. And the truth be told, our generosity, hospitality and love loving everyone we meet is the first and last line of defense against terrorists. Let Mardi Gras remind us that to some extent we all wear a mask and we all need the same things—sustenance and joy.

And radical love breathes the breath of Holy Spirit upon Ash Wednesday and turns ashes of sorrow into the anointing of joy and peace. We started this brief consideration of radical love with the understanding that love itself is a mystery. It is ineffable. God is love and God is all that we can say about it and more. God is all in all, the totality, the unity of creation. God is radical love loving us and loving through us. Radical love liberates us from shame, judgment and fear. Radical love breathes the breath of renewal and transformation upon us and upon our holy days of romance, carnival and repentance. Further, radical love reminds us that all the good things we do mean nothing if they are only done because it is what good people do. A commitment to social justice is only social work without love. And church is only a social club without a commitment to love, to community, and to worship.

Because in the presence of the One who loves us with a love that is itself the creative power of creation, the is-ness that makes something out of nothing, the transcendent mind that makes order out of chaos, the forgiveness that forgives the unforgivable, the love that loves the unlovable, the touch that touches the untouchable, the Being that sees beyond sight, the clarity that enlightens confusion, the wisdom that turns foolishness into faith and facts, the

well that never runs dry, the possibility of the impossible, the strength for the struggle the will to survive, the determination to begin again and again and again, the shelter in times of storm, the rock in a weary land, the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the End, in the presence of the Holy One, the only thing we can do is worship. We sing God's praises in joy and thanksgiving knowing that God who is love loves each of us personally, loves each of us in the extreme, loves each of us radically. It is pure grace. We cannot earn God's radical love and we cannot lose God's radical love. And our worship, our praise to the glory of God is to love with that same love.