

**Prayer:**

**MORNING PRAYERS**

June 19, 2016  
All Souls Unitarian Church  
Rev. David J. Robb

Because we recall from time to time that we are members of the great human family,  
that we belong not just to those with whom we are most familiar,  
but also to the generations that have preceded us,  
and to the generations that will follow us, who will reap the benefits of our accomplishments  
and share the costs of all we have neglected,  
Because we care about our brothers and sisters, those who are close and those whom we regard  
as strangers, those who believe as we do and those that do not,  
That is why we sometimes say,  
OUR FATHER

Because we realize our task is never fully accomplished, that our longing does not diminish over  
the course of an entire lifetime,  
Because the spirit does not fully quench our thirst but makes it more acute,  
That is why we sometimes say,  
WHICH ART IN HEAVEN

Because we live in a world where a few hold the power of life and death over the many,  
Because we know that tyranny is the deepest offense to the name of God,  
That is why we sometimes say,  
HALLOWED BE THY NAME

Because we still live in the shadow of genocide and death on a grand scale,  
a time in which the demonic will still threatens all we hope for and cling to,  
Because we distrust all instances where massive concentrations of power are accumulated,  
That is why we sometimes say,  
THY KINGDOM COME

Because we are subject at times to debilitating fears,  
Because we suspect even our own motives and convictions  
Because we are not without irony about our own efforts and commitments to what we know to  
be the good  
That is why we sometimes say  
THY WILL BE DONE

Because we dare to ask that we be provided our daily bread in the very same breath that we also  
ask to be forgiven,  
Because we know that even as we prosper people all around us go hungry and starve to death,  
people who are living lives of not-so-quiet desperation,  
That is why we sometimes say,  
LEAD US NOT INTO TEMPTATION

Because we have done so little to curb our human drive toward violence,  
Because our fears have driven us to amass great stockpiles of weapons capable of ending all life  
on earth,  
Because we honor the right of individuals to arm themselves to the teeth more than we honor  
the right of all of us to live in freedom from fear,  
Because we often seem to have lost the ability to take charge of our own destiny or fate,  
Because we give ourselves up daily to resignation and helplessness,  
That is why we sometimes say,  
BUT DELIVER US FROM EVIL

Because we need the steadfastness and vision that faith brings to embolden our resolve to face  
the tasks that appear so often to be so overwhelming,  
Because we require the moral imagination that faith brings to expand our too small dreams and  
petty calculations,  
Because we depend on  
--the serenity faith brings to accept the things we cannot change  
--the courage faith brings to change those things we are capable of changing  
--the wisdom faith brings to discern the difference,

That is why we sometimes say,  
FOR THINE IS THE KINGDOM  
AND THE POWER  
AND THE GLORY

and we trust that your spirit will be there with us and for us over the long haul,  
even FOREVER AND EVER.

AMEN

Adapted and rewritten from *Prayer Poems* by Dorothee Sölle

**Sermon:**

**LOVE AND FEAR**  
**Sermon by David J. Robb**  
**All Souls Unitarian Church, New York City**  
**June 19, 2016**

Text: "There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out all fear."  
--I John: 4: 17

A number of years ago a young man, who was studying for the ministry at Princeton Theological Seminary arrived at the office of one of his professors, Dr. Henry Knox Sherrill. It appeared to the professor that the young man, one of his best students, was troubled about something, so he inquired if there was something he was concerned about. The student explained that in addition to being enrolled as a full-time student preparing for a career in ministry, he was also serving as a part-time pastor of a small church in a nearby town on the weekends, and this required him to prepare sermons regularly for services on Sunday mornings. "Yes," replied Dr. Sherrill, "I was aware that you are serving a congregation while you prepare for ordination. Are you experiencing some conflict among members of your congregation?" "Oh no, replied the student, "it's nothing like that. It's just that...well I am preaching week after week, and...I just don't see anybody change."

"Oh, I see," said the professor, who then leaned back in his chair to think for a moment about how to respond. He took his time. He drew a pipe from his pocket, slowly filled it with tobacco, lit it, and blew a stream of smoke toward the ceiling. Turning to the young man he inquired, "Well, you don't really expect people to change every time you preach, do you?" "Oh," said the student, somewhat taken aback, and a little sheepishly, "well...no, of course not." At which point his professor leaned forward and exclaimed, "Well, then, that's your problem!"

I feel compelled to share that story with you because I believe it is incumbent upon me to put my cards on the table right from the start. Preaching for me is a challenging, even a daunting, undertaking, a project that I take quite seriously, and one that I always approach in the spirit of what Søren Kierkegaard once termed, "fear and trembling." Though I only preach infrequently at All Souls, whenever I do so, truth in advertising compels me to be forthright with you. Whenever I preach I fully expect each and every one present to change. And to change for the better. In all honesty, the prospect of being challenged to change may not have been what motivated you to attend this service this morning. But at least you will not be able to say later that I failed to give you a fair warning.

This is the second year in a row that I have preached on the Sunday morning following a major national tragedy. On this same Sunday a year ago I stood in this pulpit in the aftermath of the shooting of nine black people who were gathered for a Bible study and discussion at the Emmanuel AME Zion church in Charleston, South Carolina. That shooting was perpetrated by a deranged young white man who claimed to be acting as a Christian.

Today we are mourning the death of 49 individuals, most of them young, most of them members of the LGBT community, and most of them Latino or Latina, who had been celebrating together at a night club in Orlando Florida. This time the act was carried out by a deranged young man who claimed to be acting on behalf of his Muslim faith. He even took time during his killing spree to dedicate his macabre activity and pledge his allegiance to the radical Islamic state, ISIS.

What, we ask ourselves in utter frustration, has become of this country of ours? How has the original wise and humane commitment of our founders to freedom of religion for all people and religious pluralism been so perverted by a minority of religious zealots and turned against us with such relentless and deadly consequences?

This morning I invite us to reflect for a brief time on the passage we heard read a short while ago from this ancient letter attributed to one of Jesus' apostles and closest friends, the apostle John that is found in the New Testament. I do not expect that all of our questions will be answered, but it is possible we may be given fresh insight from an unexpected source, and possible strength for the journey. And one thing more: I invite you to hear these words written centuries ago as if they were specifically addressed to each one of us gathered here; as if we were meant to hear these very words and be addressed by them at this specific moment in our lives. And more, to take them with us in the days and weeks ahead, to return to them, reflect upon them, and to ask ourselves, "How do these words apply to me?"

Here are the words I want us to hear and reflect on for the next several minutes:

First, "God is love, and the one who loves abides in God and God abides in that individual."

And second, "There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out all fear."

I expect that we may have some difficulty in grasping what this author is trying to communicate. One of the reasons may be that when we hear the word "love" we automatically assume he is talking about a very special feeling that we reserve for very special people. That is without doubt one result of having been conditioned by Western culture for the past 250 years to think of love in the context of romantic or family relationships, relationships that take place exclusively or at least preeminently within the *feeling functions* of individuals. The novelist Alain de Botton pointed this out in a remarkable op/ed article that appeared in the Sunday New York Times just two weeks ago. He said that this romantic ideal of love has so infected the Western idea of marriage that it has become a near fatal flaw. In the grip of this romantic ideal, we are persuaded to believe there is one individual who exists that can and will meet all of our needs and satisfy our every yearning. Of course such a person is a fantasy and does not exist; yet at the same time so much of our popular culture is overwhelmingly dedicated to convincing us this myth must be true. Its actual effect, then, is to set us up time and again for inevitable disappointment.

The author of the Epistle of John wrote his thoughts in Greek, not English, and therefore had at his disposal several words that we translate as "love." Perhaps the closest approximation to what we moderns imagine as romantic love might be the Greek word *eros*. But when our author refers to love, he does not use the word *eros*, he chooses the word *agapé*. And *agapé* contains within it both a spiritual and sacred connotation. It is, for instance, the word the Bible

always reserves for the love with which the creator God relates to human beings and to the entire created order. So when our author uses the word “love,” he is not speaking about a human feeling at all. He is, rather, referring to a force that he believes is transcendent, a force that grasps us from beyond, sometimes even against our will, that engages us and makes use of human intelligence and compassion for the sake of creating communities dedicated to the values of radical care, of justice, and of peaceful co-existence.

How extraordinarily different, then, is this author’s vision of love that he calls *agapé* from the romantic ideal with which we often confuse it. The romantic ideal proclaims, “Love is God;” the author of the Epistle of John says no, “God is love” – a profound difference that will become more apparent only upon careful reflection. Romanticism says love is a strong feeling and therefore depends entirely on a particular mood. The author of our text asserts that love has little, if anything to do with feeling states. Love, he says, is a transcendent force that engages our energy to break down the walls that separate us from one another. Romantic love proclaims, “It’s all about me and my feeling good about myself.” (I will never forget hearing William Sloane Coffin, the former pastor of Riverside Church who liked to assert, “The smallest package in the entire world is an individual who is all wrapped up in himself!”) Our author says love has very little to do with you and everything to do with the other. He implies that love will be challenging, will probably force you to make difficult choices, and will certainly require you to risk your personal comfort for the sake of making God’s love manifest in the world.

But the writer of the Epistle of John does not stop there. He goes on to make a remarkable claim: “There is no fear in love,” he states, “but perfect love casts out all fear.” Here, in these brief words this author has deftly brought us to the brink of an original insight. We think that the opposite of love is hatred, or possibly the opposite of love is indifference. What he asserts is that the opposite of love is fear. In short, the author of this letter says the heart of the matter is something like this: each one of us has an option as to how we will go about whatever it is that we do in the world. Either we approach our work and other people in an attitude of love, or we approach our work and other people in an attitude of fear. And do not be put off if you think this option sounds too simplistic. Our author believes this choice to be quite significant; he believes this option to be at least as important as it is difficult. And I suspect he believes it may, as a matter of fact, be one of the most important lessons any of us may learn in an entire lifetime. Do we live as if love were the final motive? Or do we live as if fear were the final motive?

Let us look more closely at what John might have meant by “fear.” The word he uses in this passage is the Greek word *phobos*. That, of course is the word that becomes the basis for the English word “phobia” a word that psychiatry especially has grabbed hold of to create a veritable lexicon of human mental ailments. You are familiar with some of them I am sure. There is, for example, claustrophobia, the abnormal fear of enclosed spaces. There is also its opposite, agoraphobia, the abnormal fear of open spaces. Some people have an abnormal fear of water, and that is usually referred to as hydrophobia.

In Greek, the word *phobos* actually has several possible meanings depending on the context in which it is used. It can have a violent connotation, something like “fright,” or “terror,” or “deep dread.” It can also mean something more subtle, as I think the apostle intends it in our text, something more closely akin to what we mean by “apprehension,” or “anxiety.” Perhaps a more

accurate translation would read: “there is no anxiety in love, but perfect love casts out all anxiety.” But notice that *phobos* does not refer to a feeling alone. It also indicates a kind of action as well; it carries within it a suggestion of withdrawal. In its most extreme form, this withdrawal will have the connotation of “flight,” or “running away.” In its more subtle form, it suggests “avoidance,” or “shrinking back from.”

And whereas *phobos* implies withdrawal, avoidance, shrinking away from, and breaking apart, *agapé* implies the exact opposite – namely, moving towards, drawing near, a commitment to unite with, to heal, to reconcile. *Agapé* always implies something that transcends our human instinct that is embodied in fear – to withdraw, or shrink back from. It is in this sense, then, that the opposite of *agapé* is not hatred or indifference; the opposite of *agapé* is *phobos*.

So it is that this ancient letter contained in the New Testament invites us to see that each of us is confronted every day in all that we do with a radical choice. It is not the choice between two feelings, but something much more substantial. It is the choice between two styles of life. On the one hand is an attitude toward life characterized by *phobos*, by fear, by anxiety. It is this attitude that causes us to withdraw from, to distrust anything or anyone we regard as unlike us. It is this attitude that lies deep within the urge to distrust or hate the Other whom we sense to be unlike us and therefore a threat to our sense of comfort and well-being. It is in this sense that we are able to see something as pervasive in our culture as racism or injustice based on sexual identity goes far beyond personal prejudice or mere bigotry. Racism and sexism and homophobia – all of these are deeply rooted in an overwhelming fear and anxiety about Otherness.

On the other hand is an attitude towards life characterized by *agapé*, by love. Not romantic love, which is always oriented toward the familiar, but the love that empowers us from far beyond our comfort zone. That is why the writer of the Letter of John identifies that love as *agapé*, the love that comes from God. And the principal difference is this: where fear is always focused on the consequences, on the anticipated result, love is always focused on the thing itself, upon the loved one, upon the task, upon the claim, and trusts the results to the mind of God.

We are all aware that millions of people all over the world are in thrall to powerful fundamentalist ideologies that disguise themselves in the garments of ancient religious wisdom and authority. Such ideologies continue to infest and corrupt the genuine insight contained in every major religious tradition. And, of course, these fundamentalist ideologies do not stop there. They seep into and infect a variety of political ideologies as well. There is, of course, an infallible way to spot this distortion of religion, for there is a dead giveaway to this corruption of authentic religious truth: It never proceeds from a sense that it is in the service of a transcendent and divine love. It is always concealed in the rhetoric of grievance and it is always directed, first and foremost, toward provoking our deepest and most primitive fear of the Other. Nor do I need to remind you that we are currently in the midst of a grim political campaign where we are constantly subjected to rhetoric that appeals almost exclusively to our sense of entitlement, to our sense of injury, to our primeval fears of the Other.

Some of you were present the previous two Sunday mornings for the Adult Education programs that featured Willie Pietersen’s splendid description of the extraordinary leadership qualities of Nelson Mandela. Most of you are aware that Mandela served as the first black President of

South Africa, after spending years in prison for his resistance to the injustices that resulted from the policies of the hateful apartheid system. Mandela was a remarkable individual who seemed to rise above personal bitterness and an instinct for retribution. He seemed to practice his Presidency within a vision of national unity. At one point Pietersen quoted Mandela, describing his strategy as a leader in this way: “It is not so much about the liberation of blacks from years of bondage as it is the liberation of whites from fear.”

That, of course, is close to the wisdom of the author of this remarkable letter in the New Testament. It is in the spirit of love that we are drawn to regard our tasks, our undertakings, our relationships, as a kind of spiritual adventure. In the spirit of love we are released to pursue our dreams and relationships with a kind of daring trust. In the attitude of love we are free to commit ourselves to whatever we are doing, howsoever momentous or seemingly trivial, with deep care. Not because of what others may think of us, not because we are in dread of failure, but because we are focused on the thing itself.

To paraphrase Paul’s famous letter to the Church at Corinth: What does it matter if we hold in our hand a degree from a prestigious institution of higher education, and have not *agapé*? What does it matter if our talent is fully developed, recognized, and honored, but our lives are impoverished for lack of *agapé*? What if we accomplish many things, but do not deeply care about what we do, or for whom we do it? For then we will become little more than a “noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.”

Prayer: O Thou who has given us not a spirit of fearfulness, but a spirit of power, and of confidence, and of love, be to us that presence that casts out fear, lest we be overcome by our insecurities and end by losing our souls. Amen