

The Only Measure
the Rev. Edmund Robinson
First Church in Boston
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This sermon has become irresistible for this time of year. Early February gives us a conjunction of Darwin's Birthday and Valentine's Day. Many years ago a professor named Michael Zimmerman started the Clergy Letter Project in which ministers sign to publicly show our support for the theory of evolution and we agree to preach on the topic on the Sunday closest to Darwin's birthday, which has come to be called Evolution Sunday.

But Evolution Sunday is also Love Sunday, because Darwin was born two days before and several hundred years after St. Valentine and there couldn't be a more central religious value than love in Unitarian Universalism. We don't have saints, but if we did, St. Valentine would be high on our list.

So let's start with his story. It is of course, shrouded in legend and who knows what of it is true, but the story goes, in the Second Century of the Common Era, a cruel Roman Emperor named Claudius was concerned because he was running out of soldiers. Claudius was making war on almost everyone around, but he couldn't raise a big enough army. He realized that the young men of Rome would rather make love than war. So he decreed that no marriages could take place in this time of emergency. But Valentine circumvented this decree and went on marrying couples in secret. For this he was arrested, tried and put to death. Since his martyrdom, he has become canonized and is the patron saint of lovers.

Amor vincit omnia, said Virgil, love conquers all. We like to think so. In 1935 the Universalists adopted a statement avowing a faith in "God as Eternal and All-Conquering Love." Love, we like to say, is the most powerful force in the universe.

It is also one of the most debased, common, cheap, vulgar words in the language. Most pop tunes are about love, the headlines you see from supermarket tabloids are about love, in a sense. Madison Avenue exploits this little four letter word to sell all kinds of products. Many, probably most of us, have been seriously injured by love at some point in our lives. Yet Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said love was "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."

The love that is represented by God in Universalist theology is much broader than the love which would induce people to get married, but it includes such love. Christian thought has often distinguished between love as eros, erotic love and love as agape, a selfless love for all humankind supposedly exemplified by Jesus's sacrifice on the cross. I think it's all of a piece.

Love leads us as UUs towards a wider inclusion. If God loves all people too much to damn any to hell, don't we have the obligation to do likewise? When we have a falling out with other people, the prayer that Jesus taught instructs us that if we ask for forgiveness from God, we must offer forgiveness to others. God is love. There is a straight line from the 1935

Universalist affirmation to our First UU principle, that we covenant to affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person. But with these two birthdays so close upon each other, if we're talking love and evolution, we need to ask what light evolution can shed on how we come to love in the first place.

The basics are well-known. When we look at the whole animal kingdom, the most distinctive features of human beings physically are our large heads and large brains. And that creates a problem at birth, getting that head through the birth canal. As a result, human infants have to do a lot of their growing after birth, or another way of saying that is that human babies are born at an earlier stage of development than other animals. It takes a long time after birth for a human baby to be able to fend for itself.

This means that if the baby is to survive into adulthood, one or more adults, usually parents, must form a bond which will induce the adult to protect the child. The chemical agent for this bond is called oxytocin. The mother's body makes oxytocin while in labor, and this acts like Love Potion Number 9, making the mother fall in love with her newborn infant upon his or her arrival. The act of nursing brings further floods of oxytocin. An article in the science section of the New York Times put it this way:

"Oxytocin has been described as the hormone of love. This tiny chemical, released from the hypothalamus region of the brain, gives rat mothers the urge to nurse their pups, keeps male prairie voles monogamous and, even more remarkable, makes people trust each other more.¹"

Oxytocin establishes a love bond between the mother and the child and that's basic to allowing the child to survive. But how about the bond between mother and father?

This is the stuff we think of on Valentine's Day. There are multiple ways in which evolution has equipped us for the experience we call love. And these are the physical foundations for some of the grandest experiences we have in this life.

But there are many kinds of love. Love may lead you to become infatuated with another person so that you lose all sense of perspective. You may forget to eat, to sleep. Love may lead you to establish a family and care for your children, but it may also lead you to get enamored with someone else and abandon your spouse and children.

There is love which is heroic and grand and noble and love which is disgraceful. A famous example of the latter is right at the apex of Jewish history as related in the Bible. King David became enamored of Bathsheba when he saw her bathing on a rooftop and being the powerful king he was, he arranged to put Bathsheba's soldier husband in harm's way in battle so that he would be killed. After Uriah's death, David took Bathsheba for his wife and she bore him a son Solomon, who was second only to David in Jewish history as the greatest king of Israel. All stemming from this act of stark betrayal.

Love can be the glory of human life and can be its biggest pain as well. I expect that each of us has a story we could tell about being wounded in love. I was once so wounded, I wrote a poem which said I now knew how the earth felt when the moon had been ripped out of its side.

When you feel that kind of pain, your whole instinct is to close up in self-protection, to make sure that you can't be wounded that way again. But then you have to ask yourself, is this how I want to live the rest of my life? A closed-up, loveless existence?

No, I answered myself at the time, I have chosen the path of ministry within Unitarian Universalism, and this religion as well as the position I have chosen within it, requires that I remain open to love. That is what I want to be doing in my life. Opening to love.

How can love hurt us? Let me count the ways. You may love someone desperately who doesn't love you back. You may love someone still who doesn't love you any more. You may love someone who is physically or mentally abusive or cruel or addicted to alcohol or drugs. In the #Metoo age, we were reminded that a kind of love combined with power may lead to sexual assault or harassment, and some victims of this kind of behavior will be led by love not to report it to the proper authorities. Then there is loneliness; the person you have loved most in your life dies, or moves away, or you fall out of love. We may feel incapable of love. Or we so easily convince ourselves that we don't have enough love. We make ourselves unhappy because we think nobody loves us or we aren't loved enough. We look for love, often in the wrong places. For most of us most of the time, this lack of love is a delusion; a moment's reflection will reveal we have all the love we need already.

We think of love as all good, but a better way to look at it is to realize that love itself is neither good nor bad. Like sexual desire, like fire or electricity, it has enormous benefits and enormous dangers.

Of course, if you and I were designing the world, we'd take out the bad stuff, wouldn't we? We'd make sure that if you fall in love with a certain person, that person has to fall in love with you. We'd never let anyone in a committed relationship have eyes for anyone outside it, and love would always stay new and exciting, day in and day out. Brothers and sisters, parents and children, spouses and lovers would never fall out with each other, would never encounter disagreements, have spats, stop speaking to each other for years at a time.

If we perfected love to eliminate these painful aspects, would the resulting world be better than what we have now? It would be duller, that's for sure. But there would be missing something else, something very important: the chance for spiritual growth.

For from the perspective of my seventy-something years walking the earth, the challenges of love, my friends, the challenges of love are part of its glory. Maybe for some of us love descends from the sky, is simply visited on you from the universe. For me, the love that I experience comes from within. I generate it, together with those around me whom I love.

When I perform weddings, I often tell couples "A household cannot afford to run out of love. You can run a household without electricity, or plumbing for a while, but you can't do without love. If it runs out, you have to make some more; make love in all the senses of that phrase."

The man who occupied this pulpit last Sunday wrote a beautiful song about love back in the 1980s called "Everything possible." That's Fred Small, a latter-day St. Valentine. In the 1980s we didn't have an emperor trying to shut down marriage, but we had a lot of social forces saying whom one could marry. The story that I heard of how this song came to be written -- and I haven't checked this out with Fred Small, so his memory may differ -- was that there was a public controversy over a same-sex couple here in Massachusetts who had a foster child they wanted to adopt. This was decades before the full-fledged fight over same-sex marriage, but there was the same sort of opposition to same-sex adoption. The issue landed on the desk of Governor Dukakis, who would soon be running for President. The governor had a chance to get

out in front on the progressive side of the issue, but instead he caved to the conservative opposition: he affirmed that the Commonwealth would not permit same-sex couples to adopt a child.

Advocates for LGTB+ rights were furious and that outrage was well expressed by Fred Small in his song which became an anthem for a generation, and which was chosen as a hymn by the UUA in *Singing the Journey*, the teal hymnal, at number 1019. The song is in the voice of a parent putting a child to bed. And one of the reasons for its remarkable power is that it envisions a parent who is trying to deliver a message of liberation to the child, when the reality for so many children is that parents can be part of the problem, totally unsympathetic and even hostile to new possibilities for the child.

You are welcome to join in verse or chorus of 1019 in the teal hymnal;

We have cleared off the table, the leftovers saved,
 Washed the dishes and put them away
 I have told you a story and tucked you in tight
 At the end of your knockabout day
 As the moon sets its sails to carry you to sleep
 Over the midnight sea
 I will sing you a song no one sang to me
 May it keep you good company.
 You can be anybody you want to be,
 You can love whomever you will
 You can travel any country where your heart leads
 And know I will love you still
 You can live by yourself, you can gather friends around,
 You can choose one special one
 And the only measure of your words and your deeds
 Will be the love you leave behind when you're done.
 There are girls who grow up strong and bold
 There are boys quiet and kind
 Some race on ahead, some follow behind
 Some go in their own way and time
 Some women love women, some men love men
 Some raise children, some never do
 You can dream all the day never reaching the end
 Of everything possible for you.
 Don't be rattled by names, by taunts, by games
 But seek out spirits true
 If you give your friends the best part of yourself
 They will give the same back to you.
 You can be anybody you want to be,
 You can love whomever you will
 You can travel any country where your heart leads
 And know I will love you still
 You can live by yourself, you can gather friends around,
 You can choose one special one
 And the only measure of your words and your deeds
 Will be the love you leave behind when you're done

The title of this sermon is taken from the closing sentence of the chorus: in the end, "the only measure of your words and your deeds will be the love you leave behind when you're done."

If you're looking for a purpose to life, this is it. The measure of your words and your deeds will be the love you leave behind when you're done.

I said at the beginning that our value of love leads us as UUs to greater inclusion, to reaching out and bringing in to the circle of love people or ideas which the society at large leaves out.

Darwin's evolution favors some altruism, but it is altruism towards our close genetic kin, a kind of tribalism. Here's how it works: if I'm standing in a circle with a bunch of cousins and somebody throws a hand grenade into the middle of the circle, a pure evolutionary logic would dictate that I'd throw myself on the grenade to save my siblings and maybe my first cousins, but not my second cousins or relatives more distant. Why? Because evolution gives me an incentive to see that my own genes are passed down to future generations, but it doesn't give me an incentive to care about those further from my gene-line.

So the universal love preached by Jesus in his Sermon on the Mount "love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" and in his parable of the Good Samaritan goes against the grain of those instincts favored by evolution. In other words, we humans have evolved as tribal creatures; some recent political campaigns demonstrate how effectively those tribal instincts can be mobilized against the more universalizing ethic.

Darwin's evolution, then, is one kind of limit on love, and it's one we can overcome only by recognizing that there is a certain human nature and that the ethic Jesus preached requires us to evolve further.

We are fighting our own tribal instincts, and we will never achieve perfect love. Whether we're talking about love between spouses, between parents and children, within a church or other community or on social media, the love we practice will always be imperfect. Sometimes we'll have to press the reset button, and begin again in love.

Yes, there are limits which nature places on love. Back in the 1980s, when Fred Small wrote "Everything Possible," some people argued that erotic love between people of the same sex was unnatural. I am not making that argument today, and as same-sex marriage has become more widespread, it is less likely to be seen as unnatural. People that used words like unnatural, it turns out, were deliberately ignoring those little corners of the natural world where animals engage in same-sex sexual behavior.

Do you know what I mean by religious naturalism? A lot of us in this congregation do not believe in God or in supernatural forces, but most of us would call that humanism. The problem with the word humanism is that it places us naked apes too high in the hierarchy of importance. Take the seventh principle: respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part. Not the whole and not even the main part. W@e are a part.

I have been friends for two decades with Ursula Goodenough, a cell biologist who wrote a book called *The Sacred Depths of Nature*; it was an account of the world as described by science, with religious reflections at the end of each chapter. It sparked a movement which calls itself religious naturalism, and we even tried to get a branch of it started in Unitarian Universalism, but that's another story.

Charles Darwin turned 200 years old on February 12, 2009, and to mark the occasion, I invited Dr. Goodenough to give a talk at the UU Meeting House in Chatham, on Cape Cod, which I was then serving.

One thing she said in her talk ten years ago sticks with me and I have told it in sermons ever since. At the question and answer portion of the talk, I asked her whether evolution saw any overall purpose in the universe. She responded that that very question, whether there is a purpose in nature, had tormented Charles Darwin, and he wrote to a friend, "you might as well ask your dog to explain the mind of Newton. Let each person think what they will."

Now in my congregation was Dr. Eugene Pickett, a former President of the UUA and a keen mind. He rose and followed up my question by trying to pick a simple example from nature of something that was good or beautiful for its own sake. He said, "well but the purpose of a flower is..."

Ursula finished the thought before he had even gotten it out: "that's easy, the purpose of a flower is to make nookie! The flower is the sex organ of the plant and if you didn't have the flower, the plant wouldn't reproduce."

I think that neatly illustrates how religious naturalism is different from other religious systems. The question is a natural one to wonder about; our brains are conditioned to look for purpose in anything, because in our everyday lives, to say nothing of our sense of morality and justice, reading and understanding the purpose behind an action is a very useful skill, and it is easy to see how natural selection favors those who have it.

So I asked a religious question, is there purpose in the universe, and the answer comes back, what does science say? Well science does not find overall purpose in the universe, though it can describe overall trends like a tendency for an orderly system to become disordered. But science can tell you about where in evolution your own wish to find purpose comes from.

My friends, we spend our lives in making karma. We can make more love or we can tear down the love that others have made. Each word and each deed is like a pebble thrown into a lake. It may not have much effect, but it at least creates ripples, which interact with other ripples. Let that be our purpose here on earth, the only measure of our words and our deeds, the love we leave behind when we're done. Amen.