

RECIPES FROM TEREZIN

Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton

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Scripture: I John 4:7-21; Psalm 22:25-31

Love is one of those words that is slippery and inexact. Mention love in a room like this and there are 500 definitions, none of them fixed and all of them changing constantly.

Krister Stendahl of Harvard Divinity School says that you should never use the word “love” in a sermon unless the text itself contains the word, and then, only sparingly.

Is love the passionate exuberance of the sixteen year old who believes in eternal love, undying, driven by emotions and hormones? Or is love the clasp of wrinkled hands that reach across the sofa, the peck on the cheek that the elderly couple now touched with Alzheimer’s give each other at bedtime? Is love the labor of a woman on the birthing board, agonizing and straining as she pushes her child away, every muscle in her body aching to thrust new life into the world, then draw it close? Or is love the vigilance of a parent staying up through the night tending a little one who is running a temperature, dabbing her forehead with a cold washcloth, calming her fears while worrying at the wheeze in the child’s lungs? It’s all these things, of course, which is why love is such a slippery word.

Paul describes its ensign qualities. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends.

The Greeks thought love so complex they had to distinguish familial love from divine love and both from the erotic. Love is a elusive word, and never more slippery than on Mother’s Day.

Annie Lamott describes a day at Stinson beach in California and the awkward feelings of love she has for her mother. She looks at a photograph of that day at the beach and notices the gentleness on her face as she glances at her mother. “I sometimes feel this,” she says.

But I was only feeling this about half the time that day. The rest of the time I was annoyed. I was annoyed in general because she is not at all whom I would have picked... I would have chosen someone tall, elegant and physical. I would have chosen someone with a ferocious belief in herself and God and me....

Specifically, I think I was annoyed that day because she acts so much older than she is. She is only seventy-three, but she staggers along in the sand like a toddler. I was annoyed because she had asked me once again with anxious hope if I had met anyone nice. I was also annoyed because dark pink lipstick was smeared on her front teeth. ...I was annoyed because we were waiting for my younger brother and my son to meet us at the beach for a Fourth of July party at a friend’s house, and each time my brother’s name was even mentioned, my mother acted like a Frank Sinatra fan...

Also, I secretly believed she could do better if she tried, that... she acts this way to torture and control me. In my worst moments, I imagine her at home just before I pick her up, wearing a telephone headset and berating some commodities trader. Then when she hears me knock, she dashes to her bedroom, stashes the headset, pulls on a Ruth Buzzi cardigan, applies lipstick to her teeth, and totters to the front door to let me in.

On the beach I hold her hand and feel that my heart could break with love for her.¹

Is it too little to say that love, especially when it comes to our mothers, is complicated? For all love's many forms and expressions, nothing about it is easy.

When John writes to the little community that bears his name in the letter from which we read today, John offers a simple answer to a complex question. How is it that we learn to love?

The common wisdom is that it comes naturally, that there is something in the heart that loves, and all we do when we love another person is to express the love that is innately there. But for John, that is not enough as an explanation. "Love," John says, "is from God and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God, for God is love."

Notice John doesn't say the opposite. John doesn't say love is God. Love is too complicated to say that. Much of our human love is fickle, after all, and confused with lust and desire and self-interest and loneliness, and a lot of other feelings that are not love, but something else.

God is love, John says, and everyone who loves is born of God. What John wants us to know is that we first learn how to love from God. And because God has loved us, we love one another. All the time we thought it was something innate, a natural desire! But the truth is that if love came only from inside us, began with us and ended with us, it would be mostly self-interest, and not self-sacrifice, and self-sacrifice is the best of what love is, at least what God's love is. And so is the best of our love as well, self-sacrificing love.

Sometimes I wonder if it's too cynical to say that most of our loving is self-interest, and then I remember that when we say, "I love you," it's as often as not a question. An offering with strings attached, a down payment on being loved back.

God's love is selfless and sacrificial. It is offered even when we are unable to respond in kind. Clifton Black of Princeton Seminary expands on that point:

Contrary to our inclination toward the *quid pro quo*, God has decided in our favor apart from our ability to reciprocate, gracing us with love prior to and independent of any response we might offer, for no reason other than that love is the very nature of God that is knowable by human beings. For [John], love is not one thing among many that God does; *everything* that God does is loving.²

On Mother's Day we remember our mothers, who usually get credit for teaching us most of what we know about love. And while there is nothing sweeter to the memory than a mother's love when it is sweet, we have a tendency to lay more on our mothers and our memory of them than we should. Likewise, we blame them for more than we should. There is something about a mother's faults, her inescapable humanness, that

deserves a statute of limitation, an expiration date after which we all must assume responsibility for our own faults and limitations and no longer lay them at the feet of our parents as if we had no responsibility for ourselves.

Mother's Day has become more complicated in this post-Freudian, modern time when so many people have published and spoken of the complex range of feelings, in fact, the common failures of mothers to live up to the super-human image that we have projected on their role.

A third of all mothers in this city live in poverty, and a quarter of all children being raised in New York are children in a family where the mother is a single parent.

There are significant reasons why women are facing the lonely, difficult prospect of being mother and father in a household that is totally dependent on her to provide the family's income. We are always shocked by parents who injure their children by intention or by neglect, but the reality is that unemployment and cramped housing and lack of education, poor medical support and inadequate counseling all make the work of being a mother more difficult especially when there is not enough money for the basic things of life.

And yes, many people these days have very mixed feelings about their mother's place and role in their life. Frederick Buechner is one of those people whose mother was, (*how do you put it?*), more complicated than some. Over her dressing table there hung for years a mirror with an inscription in French, *Il faut souffrir pour etre belle*. You have to suffer in order to be beautiful. Buechner writes,

What she meant, of course, was all the pains she took in front of the mirror: the plucking and primping and powdering, the brushing and painting – that kind of suffering. But it seems clear that there was another kind too. To be born as blonde and blue-eyed and beautiful as she was can be as much of a handicap in its way as to be born with a cleft palate because if you are beautiful enough you don't really have to be anything much else to make people love you and want to be near you. You don't have to be particularly kind or unselfish or generous or compassionate because people will flock to you anyway... My mother... never developed the giving, loving side of what she might have been as a human being, and, needless to say, that was where the real suffering came – the two failed marriages after the death of my father, the fact that among all the friends she had over the course of her life, she never as far as I know had one whom she would in any sense have sacrificed herself for and by doing so might perhaps have begun to find her best and truest self.³

Some had mothers like Frederick Buechner's mother who could not love enough. A woman, after all, does not innately come imbued with all the gifts and qualities of being a good mother, any more than a father comes so innately equipped either. Which is, I suppose, why John urges us to learn of God's love, because God is love, and those who love God abide in God and God in them.

Every parent here has had some doubt about their ability to parent well. And the whole debate about same sex parenting is belied as much as anything, by of our painful

knowledge that assuring that the presence of both a woman and a man in parenting roles in a family is not in and of itself any assurance of having *good* parents. A loving home is not defined by gender but by grace, by kindness, by nurture, and by love.

Some women cannot bear children, yet want so much to be a mother. Some have wanted their mother's love but never found it. Some had mothers who smothered them in a cloying way, which became possessiveness and extinguished love, for want of freedom and distance and patience. Some of us have lost our mothers. And almost all of us would like to say something to our mother even now, but find we cannot. And many a mother would like to find a way to express the love they feel, but do not know any longer how to express it. Love is such an elusive thing.

Maybe we have to settle sometimes for love expressed in ways that go beyond words, that extend beyond time, that pass beyond distance.

I am grateful to my friend Rev. Christine Chakoian for pointing out an article in the Chicago Tribune of a few years ago which tells about a woman here in New York, Anny Stern, who received a call from a woman who said, "I have a package for you from your mother."⁴

This came as a shock since Stern's mother, Mina Pachter, died in World War II of malnutrition in a concentration camp called Terezin. But here was this package from Mina Pachter that had somehow made it into the hands of her daughter after all these years. When Anny Stern opened the package, she discovered a collection of recipes handwritten by her mother and the women of Terezin. She was so shaken that she put the book away for years, unable to look at it.

Eventually, a reporter from a paper here in New York wrote an article about the cookbook of Terezin recipes and arranged to have them translated and published, painstakingly edited by Bianca Steiner Brown, a former Terezin inmate who became an editor at *Gourmet* magazine. Finally, the Holocaust Museum hosted a luncheon at the Drake Hotel in Chicago that showcased some of these remarkable recipes.

"Imagine this," the article explains,

...elderly gaunt women sitting around a bunk bed whispering in the dark, feeding themselves with memories of potato herring dishes, breast of goose and desserts made of rose hips. Imagine them jotting in ornate German script the secrets to chicken gelatin ("Take a large old hen, but do not scald her") or directions for stuffed goose neck ("Sew the small side of the gooseneck [skin] together...).

Imagine these women huddled together imagining the lives they left behind; kitchens that smelled of cinnamon, tables draped in linen, families feasting on strudels and tortes and dumplings.

Imagine them fortifying their souls with memories of preparing food and sharing food. Imagine them wishing what generations of women had before them, that they could pass on their recipes to their daughters.

And then imagine them learning that their recipes survived the Holocaust even though they didn't and that more than fifty years later,

their food would come alive amid the crystal chandeliers and the gold velvet curtains of the Gold Coast Room [of the Drake Hotel]” The elegant meal finished with the thinnest sliver of dark chocolate torte, made from a recipe by Mina Pachter.

As the people at the dinner where the recipes were showcased took their first bittersweet taste of Mina Pachter’s cake that evening, their host had this to say.

Take the cookbook home. Put it on your kitchen shelf and look at the extraordinary mundaneness but wonderful mundaneness of your life, your kitchen. Choose one recipe, serve that dish, tell that story.

The Psalm for today puts it this way:

From you comes my praise in the great congregation;
My vows I will pay before those who fear him.
The poor shall eat and be satisfied;
Those who seek him shall praise the Lord.
May your hearts live forever!
All the ends of the earth shall remember
and turn to the Lord;
and all the families of the nations
shall worship before him.
To God, indeed, shall all who sleep in the earth bow down;
Before God shall bow all who go down to the dust,
and I shall live for the Lord.
Posterity will serve him
future generations will be told about the Lord,
and proclaim his deliverance to a people yet unborn
saying that he has done it.

Love may be elusive, too slippery to get your hands around, too difficult to fully understand, even difficult to express, yet love which seeks not its own but gives itself away, that is love indeed. Mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters ... God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God and God in them.

Happy Mother’s Day.

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¹ Anne Lamott, **Traveling Mercies**. (New York: Random House, 1999) 210.

² Clifton Black, “1, 2, and 3 John,” **New Interpreter’s Bible** (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998) 433.

³ Frederick Buechner, **Telling Secrets**. (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991) 14-15.

⁴ Rev. Christine Chakoian quotes this story from the *Chicago Tribune* (December 4, 1996) in her paper delivered at the 2006 Moveable Feast. Paper unpublished.