

What's Love Got to Do With It?

~ Steven Greenebaum

I well recall from back in the days when I had hair, that one of my favorite groups, the Beatles sang, "All you need is love." And they're not alone in that sentiment. I must confess I also recall some words of one of my favorite playwrights and poets, though I rush to tell you that he predates me: Sophocles. He of Oidipus fame, some twenty-five hundred years ago, wrote: "One word frees us of all the weight and pain of life: that word is love."

One of our readings this morning was from Mo-Tse, whose life actually overlapped that of Sophocles: they were living at the same time! Though, since one lived in Ancient China and the other in Ancient Greece, it's somewhat unlikely that they ever met.

He too speaks of love. All the gifts that can come from a world that will love. Well, there you have it! The Beatles, Mo-Tse AND Sophocles. Love is the answer. Case closed. ... Or not.

Of course, we use the word love rather carelessly these days. Some people will say they love steak. Some love baseball. Some love a

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television program. Some, may the Universe help them, even love politics! There are also intimate relations between two human beings, which is sometimes called lust, but frequently called love.

I don't think that any of these are quite what Sophocles, Mo-Tse or even the Beatles had in mind. I think that they are talking about a broader love, a selfless love that reaches out to the world. "Greater love hath no man, than to give up his life for his friend."

If there is any universal, *any* universal that leaps out at us from our varying spiritual paths it is the joy of and *need for* love.

From the Bhagavad-Gita of Hinduism. "When a person responds to the joys and sorrows of others as if they were his own, he has attained the highest state of spiritual union."

From the Sutta Nipata of Buddhism, which was our responsive reading. "Let none deceive another, nor despise any person whatsoever in any place. Let him not wish any harm to another out of anger or ill-will. Just as a mother would protect her only child at the risk of her own life, even so, let him cultivate a boundless heart towards all beings. Let his thoughts of boundless love pervade the whole world."

Rumi, a poet more popular perhaps now than ever, writes simply, “Love says, You cannot deny me. Try.”

The Third Humanist Manifesto, while “carefully” avoiding the word “love” states, “Humanists long for and strive toward a world of mutual care and concern.” In other words, love.

We heard earlier the words of Mother Teresa, Alice Walker and Mohammed Iqbal as well as Mo-Tse. And the choir sang words from Christian Scripture, “There is no gift greater than love.”

As a Jew, I was always attracted deeply to a prayer that is usually called simply by its first word: the Shema. The Shema is without doubt the single most important prayer in Judaism. “Hear O Israel the Lord, your God. The Lord is One.” But it is the next line that called to me, impressed me. Indelibly. “And thou shalt love the Lord thy God, with all thy heart, with all thy soul and with all thy strength.” Thou shalt LOVE. My mind boggled, even as a child that so few people stopped here and paid attention. Thou shalt *love* the Lord. Not thou shalt fear the Lord. Not thou shalt obey the Lord. Not thou shalt tremble before the Lord. No. Thou shalt love. And thou shalt love with all thy heart,

and all thy soul and all thy strength. This, for me, has always been the deep, profound, and overriding call of the Shema. Attend, Israel. This is how you are called to live. You must love, and you must love with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your strength.

But we are now left with a question. If love is the answer, and we all know it, Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Humanism, Christianity, Islam, then why aren't we all happy? We look at the world, at the poverty, the homelessness, the hatred, the war, the hurt and the loneliness, and we are forced to ask, along with the noted philosopher Tina Turner: "What's love got to do with it?"

I was a teenager during the Viet Nam war, and I remember vividly the Christmas truces; and as someone who has always enjoyed studying history, I would read of Christmas truces in any number of horrid, terrifying wars. And I always wanted to ask, do you have any idea what you're doing? "In the name of our God of love, we will stop killing, mutilating, and butchering each other ... for one day." One day. What kind of love is that?

The English writer and poet G. K. Chesterton wrote, “The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult; and left untried.” This is not just a Christian problem. It’s a Jewish problem; a Humanist problem; an Islamic problem; a Hindu problem.

It is summed up best, perhaps, by another great religious philosopher and sage ... Linus Van Pelt, in the Peanuts comic strip. “I love mankind. It’s people I can’t stand.” Proclaiming that love is the answer is easy. Living a life of love is in fact hard work.

And there’s more to it, even than that. The truth of it is that each of us needs, *needs* to be loved. And one of the hardest, most deeply despairing feelings there is, is to feel unloved. There is, if you will forgive a mixed metaphor, no more colder hell than to feel unloved – unless it is to feel not only unloved, but unlovable.

It’s a cold place indeed. I’ve been there. For a time I lived there. I would not want to return.

And the truth is, all these calls to be loving, all these calls to love others ... we can fake it; but if we don’t love ourselves, we are indeed

just faking it. I do not see how it is possible truly to love others, if we do not first love ourselves.

Some of us, I dare say right at this moment are thinking: **of course** we love ourselves. Just look at how much we buy ourselves! But if we've learned nothing else from our children, surely we have learned that love cannot be bought. And I would suggest that the person who endlessly buys him or herself toys, trinkets, clothes, cars, does so from a lack of self-love, not a surfeit.

The truth of it is that self-love, not self-indulgence, not self-conceit, but self-love, needs work. Most of us have asked the question at least at some point: am I loved ... am I deserving of love?

And so the truth is that we not only need the love of others ... we need to love ourselves. This is not to say that we are perfect. This is not to say that there is anyone in this room or on this planet who couldn't do with a little growing. But it is to say that if we cannot love our imperfect selves, it makes it very hard if not downright impossible for us to love others.

So we recognize then, two *different* but intensely related needs: the need to love and the need to be loved. And both start with our loving ourselves.

So let's take a moment. An experiment. It may be hard to do. We UU's like to live here, in our heads, not in our hearts. But sometime after we get home today, in the quiet of our own minds let us say, "Hello self. How ya doin'?" ... And then listen! And then, "Self, just wanted you to know; I love you." Or, "I'm ready to start the work of loving you." Now that is a commitment!

It starts there. Love starts there. And thou shalt love with all thy heart, with all thy soul and with all thy strength. Love starts there ... with loving ourselves. But if it stops there, we're in trouble.

For some, self-love is the beginning and the end, the alpha and the omega.

The great Rabbi Hillel, a man who I will confess has long been a hero of mine, said a little over two thousand years ago, "If I am not for myself, who will be for me? Yet if I am only for myself, what am I? And if not now, when?"

We much too often tend to forget the last sentence. But let's start at the beginning.

“If I am not for myself, who will be for me?” This is self-love. This is self-respect. And it must come first. “If I am not for myself, who will be for me?” Then Hillel continues:

“Yet if I am only for myself, what am I?” I am tempted to reply, “A CEO on Wall Street.” But that's a cheap shot. No profession, no country, no religion, no philosophy has a monopoly on the fixation with “Me! The world revolves around me!!” I don't think Hillel was trying to point to any particular profession or group of people. He was, I think, simply pointing out that a life of love must start with oneself but cannot stop with oneself. “If I am only for myself, what am I?”

But here's the kicker. There's a third sentence. It's the crucial sentence. It's the one that reminds us that it's not what we believe, but what we DO with our beliefs that counts.

“And if not now,” asks Hillel, “when?” Next Tuesday? A week from Thursday? “Once things calm down.” “When I feel better.” “When I retire.”

The Beatles were right. “All we need is love.” What they forgot to add is, “if we’ll work at it.” Sophocles was right, “One word frees us of all the weight and pain of life: that word is love.” What *he* forgot to add is, “if we will practice it ... daily. Daily: first with ourselves and then with the world.”

We are back to the Shema. We must love, with all our heart, with all our soul and with all our strength. We must do this because it will *take* all of our heart and all of our soul and all of our strength.

What’s love got to do with it? If it remains simply a concept, a philosophy, a head-game, then I believe the answer is, “not much.” Not much.

But if we are willing to slow down enough to remember to love ourselves, or to learn to love ourselves, and then to take that love and to take up the work that it is to love into the world, and if we will remember that is a journey... love is a journey, not a philosophy, a journey that begins with the first step, and then the second and then the third, and if we will take seriously Rabbi Hillel’s challenge of, “If not now, when?” Then what has love got to do with it? Everything.

But we must, I think, cease thinking of love as something that can be grasped. A goal. An end. As Mohammed Iqbal reminds us, love is indeed a journey. With hills and valleys. With peaks, and the formidable abyss or two or three.

From Islam, “None of you is a believer until he loves for his brother what he loves for himself.” A Nigerian proverb cautions us not to prod a bird with a pointed stick unless we have first tried it on ourselves to see what it feels like. From Confucianism, “Treat others as you would wish to be treated yourself.” When Jesus called upon us to love our neighbors as ourselves, he was, in fact, quoting Leviticus in Hebrew Scripture. “Love your neighbor as yourself.”

But all of these presuppose that we do indeed love ourselves. And we don't always. We don't necessarily. Perhaps, if we can begin each day saying, “Hello self. Just wanted you to know; I love you – as imperfect as you are, I love you,” then we may indeed go out into the world to love our neighbors as ourselves.

May it be so.