

Some of you will recognize the blatant rip-off of the title of my little talk today: *Love in the Time of Cholera* by Gabriel Garcia Marquez. His novel spans more than fifty years, and like all good love stories, true love prevails in the end, after overcoming many obstacles.

Whether or not love prevails in our currently unfolding story remains to be seen.

What is love?

The ancient Greeks understood several different kinds of love, marked by varying degrees of affection and connection. Romantic love between partners. The love we feel for our friends. The love we feel for our family. All these have their time and place, they exist simultaneously in varying degrees.

And then there is agape, an altruistic, selfless, unconditional love. Sometimes called spiritual or religious love. This is the ideal of love, one that is free from desires and expectations, and loves regardless of the flaws and shortcomings of others. It is what the Buddhists describe as “mettā” or “universal loving kindness.”

Our faith calls us to love in this way. How are we to love in the time of corona?

There are many obstacles in the way right now. Personal, political, physical.

The virus has forced us into our homes. We are physically isolated. When we do go out, we must distance ourselves from other people. Our economy may be deeply damaged. Many jobs have been lost. Our politics has weakened the social fabric and what little social safety net we have. Many people do not have the resources to meet the crisis and do not know where to turn. And all of us fear what the future might bring.

It has been a sudden and stunning reversal of fortune. We have been humbled.

How are we to love?

Wendell Berry offers us this insight in his essay collection *Standing by Words*:

*What can turn us . . . back into the sphere of our being, the great dance that joins us to our home, to each other and to other creatures, to the dead and unborn? I think it is love. I am performe aware how baldly and embarrassingly that word now lies on the page -- for we have learned at once to overuse it, abuse it, and hold it in suspicion.*

*But I do not mean any kind of abstract love (adolescent, romantic, or 'religious'), which is probably a contradiction in terms, but particular love for particular things, places, creatures, and people, requiring stands, acts, showing its successes and failures in practical or tangible effects. And it implies a responsibility just as particular, not grim or merely dutiful, but rising out of generosity.*

*I think that this sort of love defines the effective range of human intelligence, the range within its works that can be dependably beneficent. Only the action that is moved by love for the good at hand has the hope of being responsible and generous. Desire for the future produces words that cannot be stood by. But love makes language exact, because one loves only what one knows.*

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In some very real sense, as our world contracts, our love is given the opportunity to expand, as we come to know our immediate surroundings in a more intimate way.

We most deeply love that which is at hand, that which we can know with our sight and hearing and touch.

And that is the same as that which is at hand to other hands, and other eyes, and other ears.

It's all the same, you know. The mother in Tehran coughing up a lung who loves her kids and is loved by them is exactly the same as the mom in New York coughing up a lung who loves her kids and is loved by them. I know we don't think of it that way.

There are people who don't even think a mom in Albuquerque is the same as a mom in New York, much less a mom in Tehran. But they are the same. Exactly the same.

It's how Gandhi defined religion. He said:

*I call him religious who understands the suffering of others.*

And I might add, who understands the suffering of others not as some abstraction, but through their own suffering. Who understand it through their own particular grief and loss, their own hunger, their own fears, their own pain.

Who feel those things because they love particular things. Their particular life, their particular family, their particular friends, the particular landscape they inhabit, their particular community.

Here in the time of corona, in this time of isolation, we have been given a rare opportunity to deepen into our particular grief, and our particular loves, and for that deepening to move us into action.

Action for the good at hand, for the good that is right in front of us, action that is responsible and generous, as Wendell Berry imagined might arise from that love.

We are called to humbly reweave the fabric of love, of affection and connection, that bind us to one another, starting with that which is right in front of us, with those around us. With creative deeds, with kind words, with generosity of spirit. This is the difficult task that lies before us.

We rebuild the world – not from the top down or from the ground up – but from the heart outward, as the ripples of our loving actions spread to the farthest reaches of our knowing and beyond.

Let me close with these words from Wendell Berry: *I stand for what I stand on," he says, "the local landscape, the local community: human, animal, and vegetable alike. I see that the life of this place is always emerging beyond expectation or prediction or typicality, that it is unique, given to the world minute by minute, only once, never to be repeated. And this is when I see that this life is a miracle, absolutely worth having, absolutely worth saving. We are alive within mystery, by miracle.*