

“The Austerity of Love” (Rev. Marta Morris Flanagan)

Reading

“Kindergarten Class” by Elissa Ely, Boston Globe January 31, 2003

Because the kindergarten hoedown started prompted at 9 a.m. and because the school bells rings at 8:35, parents had 25 minutes between dropping off their kids and seeing them again at the big event.... We wandered over to the gym and sat on bleachers...

The first half of the first year of school was over. There was little direct news about its contents; morning events are too distant by dinner for six-year-olds to report on. We got our history from the teacher’s weekly newsletter. The unit was ending. Along the way, a wooden cow wearing surgical gloves have been milked, pumpkin seeds had been planted and forgotten. The hoedown was the finale.

Kids emerged from the gym doors, full of aerobic song. Film came out, camcorders. One parent fiddled with a network-worthy video camera. Other fathers watched him with interest.

Here is my kindergartner – who only wears dresses – in overalls. There is yours pulling at his cute neckerchief, looking just as uncomfortable. Someone has given their kid a stalk of straw, which he chews self-consciously. Parents are waving and whistling. A ridiculous amount of emotion is rising in this place. If love were a form of interconvertable energy, the force could power half the electrical needs of the state.

War is going to break out, recession is prominent, but none of that matters for the next few minutes. The child you love infinitely (and the child beside him that your neighbor beside you loves exactly as much) is about to burst into “Oh! Susannah.”

Their singing is off key and carried across the gym at different speeds. It worsens during “Bingo,” when the farmers begin to lose their concentration. They have already waved to their parents and managed a couple of verses. Now they hitch their overalls and kick invisible dust balls....

We are mesmerized. The father with his professional recording equipment and eye for a good picture turns it away from the kids and onto the parents. He pans across our faces when the head teacher asks us to join our children for the “Circle Dance.” We’re all loopy with love, clunking heavily down from the rafters.

Sixty kids and nearly twice as many parents join hands in the middle of the gym. Good-natured adults are holding the hands of other adults they don’t know. The teacher turns up a boom box – something tinny about Farmer Brown who steps to the left, steps to

the right, steps into the center.

“Yours is so musical,” says my neighbor. “Yours is so cute,” I say. We don’t know each other’s names and are talking about children we’ve never seen before. “Oh, she’s so effervescent!” says someone else, and my neighbor and I each assume she’s referring to ours. The amount of goodwill around here is hard to believe.

In parenthood, the first shock is the physical cost we pay without blinking. The bill comes around almost at once. Everything we do, through long and feverish nights, is in order to sustain these children who are ours, to prevent their pain when possible and absorb transferable heartache when it is not. Social scientists say it is self-promotion – we care for our own in order to guarantee our genes will preserve. Some of us might prefer a more tender explanation, though it is bad form to argue with academics.

Then the second shock comes, maybe in the middle of a hoedown. The glow of good will begins to spill over; interest extends beyond our own genes. I find myself admiring the child next to mine. It is the stupidest, most remarkable realization: Your farmer is as excellent and exceptional as mine. That’s surprising, since I love mine more than anything in the universe, and you (though it is mathematically impossible) feel exactly the same way – and yours does not belong to me or mine to you.

But it makes sense. The world, outside this room full of sweaty adoration, is large and dangerous. After they have finished milking their wooden cow and planting pumpkin seeds in paper cups, these farmers will find ways of salvaging the nation. When they do, yours will save nine, and mine will save yours, too.

In the name of self-preservation, we’d better love them all.

Sermon

I am a spiritual director. I meet with individuals once a month. We talk about their lives and about the way God shows up for them – or doesn’t. We talk about what it means to lead a faithful life. We talk of life and death, of longing and of communion – that sense of deep connection with others and with Something More. We talk of prayer or meditation. We talk about doing the right thing, the thing God would have you do, and what that could be at this juncture in your life.

This week one woman in her late sixties sat with me and talked of her work as a volunteer providing pastoral care to some members of her church. A few days earlier her minister had called and asked her to visit with someone in the church. She said she wasn’t sure she wanted to contact this person. “I just don’t like her very much,” she said. “I can love her but I don’t like her.” We laughed knowingly. What is it to love another when we don’t like them? What is it to love another who is not behaving in

especially likeable ways?

This week I met with another, a woman married with young children. Her husband is starting up a new business. His father recently committed suicide. Her husband is distracted by loss, by work, by the needs of his grieving mother. The woman sitting across from me understands but is nonetheless frustrated. What is it for her -- or her husband -- to love well?

It was a trick question the Pharisees asked that prophet from Galilee two thousand years ago. They wanted to trip him up. What, they asked, is the core of the law? What does it mean to be a religious person? a faithful person?

Jesus replied: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it. You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the laws and the prophets."

It's not about rules – which you've broken, which you bend or which you follow. It's not about beliefs, what you think is true, or what you doubt. It's how you feel toward others and how you act. It's about love.

Unfortunately the centuries have shown and each of our lives continues to show love is not as simple and straightforward as it sounds.

What does love involve? Love demands humility. The so-called "desert fathers" were hermits who lived in North Africa in the early centuries of the Christian era. One of the desert fathers said, When you see someone sin; say "O Lord he today, I tomorrow!" To love is to cultivate not only great appreciation for another's beauty and gifts but great empathy for their weaknesses and failings. To love another is to let go of self-righteousness. To love another is to have a deep compassion for them in all their frailty. One might even say that without the ability to see another's weaknesses we cannot fully love them.

Love is never finally and fully achieved. But it is a goal. It is not a resting place but a disposition, a way of being, feeling, seeing and understanding and engaging with another.

Valentines is rapidly upon us. There is talk of romance in the air. Expectations of love abound. How foolish we are in love! There is an emotional rush that comes with being in love. This month's issue of *National Geographic* claims that when we are in love our dopamine and serotonin levels change. When in love our altered brain chemistry is what enables us to stay up all night, watch the sun rise, run a race. The very chemistry of being in love makes us energetic, bold. And get this: love and obsessive compulsive

disorder have similar chemical profiles. Indeed in terms of brain activity love and mental illness are difficult to tell apart. Maybe so.

But love as emotion is not the only kind of love. True and lasting love is a deep attitude of the heart. It is characterized not so much by emotion –though emotion can certainly be part of it – as it is by a commitment we make that shapes our way of seeing, understanding and acting.

These two kinds of love – emotion and the long-term attitude of the heart, which must be learned – seem quite different from each other, but we confuse them, often dangerously at times. People develop attachments and friendships with sincere feelings of love toward the other and then are bewildered and feel betrayed when they find themselves in relationships in which real demands are put upon them to act upon the love that they feel. Love that is only a good feeling is not enough.

If you love your child, you not only have warm feelings for her, you also provide for her to the best of your ability, teach her what you believe to be good and true, discipline her to learn to care for herself and others. Similarly if you are a loving partner you feel love for the beloved but that feeling does not alone provide a sound basis for a good and lasting relationship unless, along with it, is a habitual attitude of heart that wishes for and seeks to provide for the other's well being in concrete acts of kindness, consideration and service, every day.

When snow is in the forecast my husband goes out and lifts the windshield wipers off my windshield so they won't freeze to the window. After the snow has passed he goes out and scraps my car. I've never asked him to do this. But he always does.

While the news plays on the radio I set up the ironing board and plug in the iron. I place a shirt larger than any I would wear across the flat surface. Will claims he does not know how to iron. I shake my head in feminist disbelief and continue pushing the steaming iron across the blue oxford cloth.

Love takes practice. It must be learned and exercised.

The American writer Robert Hayden wrote a poem entitled

Those Winter Sundays

*Sundays too my father got up early
and put his clothes on in the blue black cold,
then with cracked hands that ached
from labor in the weekday weather made
banked fires blaze. No one ever thanked him.*

*I'd wake and hear the cold splintering, breaking.
When the rooms were warm, he'd call,
and slowly I would rise and dress,
fearing the chronic angers of that house,*

*Speaking indifferently to him,
who had driven out the cold
and polished my good shoes as well.
What did I know, what did I know
of love's austere and lonely offices?*

Love is a series of austere and lonely offices. When we love a child, a friend, a partner, a neighbor, a stranger, most of what we do is rather unremarkable (“splintering” the “blue-black” cold and “polishing” shoes). And no one ever really knows the heartaches and labor (with “cracked hands that ached”) as well as the joys that make up our devotion. Love is in a profound sense composed of pedestrian deeds. We shovel snow, bake casseroles, send cards, make coffee, and take the trash to the dump. And only when seen in the Light is the beauty of these acts revealed.

What is the greatest of commandments? What is the essence of a good and faithful life? Not rules. Not beliefs. But Love. Not the kind of love felt in fleeting emotions, the falling in love kind of love but the love we practice all our lives, the love which is an attitude of the heart, a disposition with which we choose to engage life. Choose once again.