

Rev. Dr. Steven Jungkeit
 The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme
 Texts: Genesis 2: 20-22; Genesis 28: 10-13; Psalm 123
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I Want To Know What Love Is, Part II: A Ladder of Ascents

Several weeks ago, I began a meditation on the many dimensions of love, many of which seem to be absent from our world today. It was spurred by a conversation on the New York City subway, in which my conversation partner shared that she had emerged from her apartment building one night, and had witnessed two young people engaged in a passionate kiss. She had been startled by it, but then delighted, and she reflected on how ordinary expressions of love between human beings seem more and more rare to her. They do to me as well. People seem to be disappearing into the abstraction of their screens, she said, or maybe they were just getting lost in themselves. Meanwhile, the world seems to be getting meaner and meaner - more violent, more grasping, more indifferent to the needs of others. A kiss was a welcome sight.

It's a conversation that has stayed with me. Are we, in fact, a population starved for love? Are we starved for touch, for care, for tenderness? Are we losing the ability to form lasting and supportive relationships with one another, ones that transcend the transactional exchange of passions? Are we losing the ability to fall in love, not only with one another, but with the world in which we live?

As I've pondered those questions, I've also wondered what the Christian tradition, broadly speaking, has to contribute - and also perhaps to answer for - in this love starved present. Because I too wish to know what love is, and where it has gone. I too wish to cut through the cliches and banalities, in order to understand what it is we're talking about when we talk about love. I too wish to learn how we might cultivate it. Maybe you feel the same.

Today I'd like to spend some time exploring a discourse on love that is not in the Bible, but one that has had an overwhelming influence on Christian thought, from antiquity up until the present day. I think it will help us broaden our discussion of love. This particular discourse intersects with the Bible in some crucial ways, which is why theologians and other thoughtful readers have been drawn to it. The text I'm referring to is Plato's *Symposium*. Theologians like Origen, Gregory of Nyssa and Augustine were all influenced by it, as were later thinkers like Bonaventure and Dante, though somewhat indirectly. It had a huge impact in the modern period, and even today, theologians, especially queer theologians, turn to the *Symposium* for insight.

Now, if the thought of hearing a preacher talk about Plato, let alone the thought of reading him, makes you want to reach for your phone, think again. This is one of the most playful, joyful, scandalous and sexy books ever written. It's also one of the most profoundly searching meditations on love that's available to us. And if that's not enough to win your interest, I'll add that it's the kind of reading that makes right wing book banners fan themselves from shock. In fact, just this year, the Regents at Texas A&M University forced a philosophy professor to remove the dialogue from his syllabus.

Which ought to make the likes of us curious. I've often said that FCCOL is for lovers, and if that's true, I can think of few better books for a community such as ours to contemplate on a Sunday morning. If we do indeed exist in an era starved for love, then I submit that Aristophanes, Socrates, and all the others who take turns rhapsodizing within those pages can be of help.

Let me also add this by way of parenthesis: a few years ago when we fought back a book ban here in Old Lyme, I wrote an op-ed and put it in the *Hartford Courant*. But I was so turned up that I wrote another one a few nights later, from a hotel room during our family vacation. I never sent it. It was too snarky. But I imagined taking book banners on a tour through an actual library. And on this imaginary tour, I read to them from Homer, Ovid, Shakespeare, the Bible, and most of all, the *Symposium*, and I imagined each of them fainting away one by one as they learned what's actually contained within all those venerable volumes. My argument was that we needed either to go all the way and hide the better part of the western canon from our children or, conversely, that we might approach these questions as mature and thoughtful human beings, recognizing the complex portrayals of love and desire that have always been with us. It was an invitation to actually read and think together about different aspects of love.

So the *Symposium*. It takes the form of a conversation at a sumptuous dinner party, where each guest is given the chance to speak about love. It's an ingenious framing device, for it suggests, first, that we only come to know what love is in the midst of other people, and second, that love requires many voices if we are to understand it. Some of the guests speak memorably, and some are overshadowed by the eloquence of the others. But no one has the final word on love. Not even Socrates. For our purposes this morning, I'll concentrate on two of the speeches that take place throughout the course of the evening, that of the comedic playwright Aristophanes, and that of Socrates himself.

Aristophanes is the fourth of the *Symposium's* speakers. He tells a story about human origins not so far removed from those found in the Bible. According to Aristophanes, when the gods created humans, they were at first of no particular gender - not male, not female, but both. In effect, Aristophanes, and perhaps Plato behind him, is offering an account of the trans, non-binary origins of humanity. It's a little difficult to visualize, but the bodies of these first humans were somehow circular, suggesting both a wholeness, but also a kind of power that proved to be threatening to the gods. These circle people, who combined both male and female aspects within themselves were, in effect, too close to being divine. And so Zeus split them in two. Thereafter, they wandered around, searching for their missing half. And so we fall in love, Aristophanes suggests, because we are always in search of our lost selves, that missing piece of ourselves that we simply cannot live without.

It may seem far removed from the biblical account of human origins in Genesis, but it is not. The ancient Mediterranean world was, after all, an echo chamber, with images, stories, and ideas bearing traces of one another, as if overheard in conversation. In the biblical account, the main features of Aristophanes' story are spread across two stories - the tower of Babel in Genesis 11, in which God becomes threatened by human ingenuity and splits apart language, and then the familiar story of Adam and Eve. The name Adam actually comes from the word a'dam, which means human, or as the translation we heard earlier puts it, "the earth creature." Importantly, this earth creature, a'dam, is neither male nor female, but rather both. In the Hebrew, a woman does not emerge from a man. Rather, the original unity of the earth creature is split apart, and only then is gender introduced - ish, meaning man, and ishshah, meaning woman. The text goes on to imply a very similar need to the one found in the *Symposium* - we search for one another and long for one another because we were originally a part of one another.

For some, that's an excuse to normalize heterosexual love and to diminish anyone who departs from that norm. Indeed, Genesis 2 has become one of the "clobber passages," as our guest preacher Reilly Paige put it this summer, used to enforce heteronormativity. But I think we can just as easily read both Aristophanes and Genesis in a much more affirming and inclusive

way. Both sources imply that there are traits within us all that are coded as both male and female. Often, those of us who pass as male, say, are not permitted to exhibit female traits, and the reverse is true as well. Both texts suggest that we are all in some way searching for an elusive wholeness, something close to divine, that has not been permitted us. It's why those who are showing up in the world as non-binary these days are helping to remind us of an ancient and very biblical truth. In a broader sense, perhaps our most intimate relationships are ways of integrating aspects of ourselves that we would otherwise be missing. For example, I tend to want to live in my head, and I need not only Rachael, but my children, my friends, and ultimately all of you, my church family, to help me live more fully in my heart. However, we find intimacy in the world, we need others to help us grow into the fullness of our humanity. When we do, it is as though we were finding parts of ourselves that had gone missing.

As important as those insights might be, they still don't capture some of the other dimensions of love. How do we account for the different forms of love given to, say, our children or our parents, our friends, or our communities? How do we account for the love we feel for places, or ideals, for our work, for God? Do we not, after all, love many people, and many things? Here, we arrive at the second of the speeches in the *Symposium* that I'd like to highlight, this one from Socrates. This too has biblical and theological resonances.

When it is his turn to speak, Socrates narrates an encounter with a female wisdom figure, Diotima, who taught him everything he knows about love. And he recounts how this teacher, Diotima, shared with him an account of love's ascent, moving from smaller to ever greater spheres of passion. The first rung on the ladder has to do with the love of bodies, the way humans desire one another. So far so good, but those who limit their understanding of love to the first rung of the ladder are limited in their loves, Diotima-Socrates-Plato say. Growth requires moving to the second rung, which has to do with the recognition that beauty resides not only in one specific body, but is shared by all sorts of bodies, and in all sorts of ways. But then that leads to the third rung of the ladder, which is the realization that beauty is discovered most fully in the mind or the soul of another, in the ideas and imagination that the other possesses. But that too opens to a fourth rung, which has to do with the way ideas formed in the mind, in the spirit of individuals, are translated into collective wisdom, forming institutions and laws that give meaning to our lives. But then yet another dimension opens up, the fifth rung, as we come to yearn for knowledge itself, not for the sake of the practical management of life, but simply for the sake of knowing. And that, finally, yields to the greatest desire of all, the greatest love, which Socrates designates as the transcendent realm of the Forms, a perfect realm outside of time and beyond knowledge, that somehow structures all that is imperfect here below.

It's a gorgeous vision, and theologians ever since have been seduced by its elegance and beauty. Indeed, generations of theological thinkers have superimposed the ladder of Diotima/Socrates onto Jacob's ladder dream in Genesis, and onto the Psalms of Ascent, sung by pilgrims on their way up to Jerusalem. They imagine that the love of God moves toward ever greater levels of compass and abstraction. I will confess that I too find the ladder of ascent deeply appealing. We need accounts of how it is possible to love many things, not only the body of a romantic partner. And though I could not have imagined saying this in my twenties, we especially need accounts right now that give voice to what it is to actually love and steward institutions, rather than foolishly tearing them apart - institutions like courts and the legal system, institutions like electoral governments and parliamentary processes, institutions like universities, and yes, churches. These too are worthy of our love. It's true, some interpretations of the ladder, especially among Christians, have treated it as a hierarchy of values, with love of bodies at the bottom and love of God at the top. But Plato resists such interpretations. In fact, the entire

dialogue ends with musicians bursting into the room, forcing all of the speakers to yield, at last, to revelry. It is as if Plato himself knocks over the ladder of ascent, bringing readers of the *Symposium* back down to earth, back into their bodies. In other words, you cannot overcome the early stages of love by climbing ever higher. You must learn to dance. You must face the music.

Here again, we have an analogue in the Christian Scriptures. Throughout much of the Bible, humans attempt to ascend toward God. But like the musicians calling the philosophers back to earth, Jesus comes down. True love descends, toward the earth, toward humanity, toward bodies caught up in desire, but also caught up by illness and pain. Jesus descends the ladder, and embraces the material, bodily world as a gift of God.

For all their differences, Jesus and Plato alike remind us that our loves must grow wide, must be multiple, must be big enough, finally, to encompass the world. They both help us to see that to become human is to fall in love over and over again - with people most of all, but also with art and with music, with justice and with ideals, with the natural world, with culture, with food, and yes, with God too. But they also say this: get as abstract as you like, ascend all the way to the heavens if you wish. But sooner or later love shall require you to stoop, to kneel, to yield to the music of the world - to its raptures, but also to its dirges and laments. Love comes down.

And so let me conclude by bringing us back down to earth, by citing an example of a life devoted to the practice of love. One person who combined these tendencies in an exemplary way was Dorothy Day, someone I'm hesitant to mention because one of our members, John Loughery, literally wrote the book on Dorothy Day - several of them in fact. She is remembered for her activism, for her work on behalf of the poor, and for her spiritual devotion. She is likely to be sainted by the Catholic Church in the near future. But one of the things that makes her life so remarkable are the many loves she channeled. Rebecca Solnit notes how, in her book *The Long Loneliness*, Day chronicles those loves one after another. She recounts how she fell in love at the age of fourteen with a band conductor to whom she never spoke. She then says, "The love for my baby brother was as profound and never to be forgotten as that first love. The two seemed to go together." Before long, the narrative shifts to the Russian Revolution, which arrived in 1917. Day joined a celebration at Madison Square Garden. "I was in love now with the masses...(and) it warmed and filled my heart," she wrote. Ten years later she was in love with a man named Forster. She says, "I have always felt that it was life with him that brought me natural happiness, that brought me to God." Eventually, her love for God compelled her to leave behind her common law marriage to Forster, in order to create the Catholic Worker movement, which offered care to the poor.¹ You see, Dorothy Day ascended the ladder, but she always managed to hear the music of the world. It kept her rooted to the earth, working among and for the people she had come to love.

We need a wider vocabulary of love today than we currently have. We need maps of the soul that allow us to locate the many loves that are available to us - for bodies, yes, but also for ideals, for ethics, for a chance at shaping history for the better, for a just future, for the transcendent that goes by many names, and that we call God. Socrates, Jesus, and Dorothy Day can help us to draw that map.

Meanwhile the planet turns. The violent bear it away, while the rest of us stare at our phones. Meanwhile, the world beckons: lose yourself for my sake, it says. Lose yourself to love.

¹ Quotes taken from Rebecca Solnit, *A Paradise Built in Hell* (New York: Penguin Press, 2009), pgs. 61-62.