"Love – It's Complicated!"
Rev. Louis J. Mitchell at Alki UCC/February 20, 2022

When writing this sermon, a gazillion songs about love ran through my head –
Romantic love, family love, love of community, love of earth, love of God.

I believe love is a central to the lives of all humanity –
Seeking it, maintaining it, sustaining it, grieving it, wrestling with it.

Some of us are holding tender hearts today
As we stretch to love beyond words, realms
and sometimes even our own understanding.

Please pray with me:
Gracious God of many names and even more experiences –
we stretch for you, we ache for your touch.

Jehovah – Elohim, our God;
Jehovah – Adonai, our sovereign;
Jehovah – jireh, our provider;
Jehovah -rophe, our healer.

We depend on you for every breath and beat of our hearts.
We lean on you in times of grief, despair and worry.
We thank you for every good thing in our lives.

Please continue to hold us and guide us,
as we try to figure out ways to honor you with our actions in the world.
Tend to us, swaddle us, nourish us, lead us, we pray.
May the words of my mouth & the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, God
– my rock, my redeemer, my glory and my guide. Amen.

Most of us are probably familiar with the story in our reading from the Hebrew scripture –
We've heard of Joseph and his fancy princess dress.
We've heard of him being abused by his brothers,
Both for his audacity, his temperament and personality.

We have read of his capture and rise in the house of Egypt
And, ultimately his saving the house of his father.

That was not an easy love. That was complicated.
I'm not going to say if you've been abused you should rally to save the house of your abuser.

It would be simple to say love your oppressor. But I submit it's more complicated than that.

Recently Karen and I re-watched segments of the Eyes on the Prize series
and the incredible courage and the incredible hatred on display was heart wrenching.

It always is when I witness one person or group of people inflamed with fear, anger and the hatred they cause,
and another group or person refusing
to bow down to their own fears of harm
for the sake of their safety, freedom or agency.

I admit I have struggled with the words found in the Luke gospel –

[27] "But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies,
do good to those who hate you,
[28] bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.
[29] If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt.

It is hard and complicated.
Sometimes turning the other cheek
can be unhealthy and deeply codependent.

What is the balance between self-care and forgiveness?
What can love look like in situations of harm and abuse?

I was taught in recovery that hatred and resentment cause me more harm than the person or people I'm hating.

But how does one dissolve that bitter pill of lingering anger?
Drenching it in holy water or communion juice doesn't seem to do the job!

Where do we draw the line in ourselves
that says "no more"
as an act of self-love and self-preservation,
while also saying, if only to yourself,
that the ones who've harmed you
deserve love as part of creation too?

How many of you have loved someone – family, friend, lover or institution -
and also needed to sever the relationship because of trauma or abuse?
I'm not talking about the tension and conflict that exists when folks are in honest relationship with each other.
I'm not talking about towels, toothpaste or toilet seats.
I'm talking about physical, emotional, psychological, financial abuse that can exist in familial, institutional and romantic relationships.

There are schools of thought,
allegedly biblical based, that one –
especially a girl or woman, should just stay.
And stay quiet about it.

Defer to the authority of the elder,
the father, the husband, the man.

Please hear it from me – don't.
If what you've been taught in churches is that abuse of any kind should ever be tolerated,
Please hear me say, no!

You deserve safety and security!
God's love for you does not and would not require your acquiescence to abuse.

That may seem like a weird tangent to you,
But think about all the ways that faith practitioners -
have veiled misuse of their positions under masks of seeking faithful obedience!

Yes, we're going to talk about it.
There are reasons why folks don't trust the church –
The church has proved itself untrustworthy time and time again!
And has remained decidedly unwilling to tell hard truths about what we've allowed in the name of God! Amen!

The big questions are –
What does love look like when we've been harmed
And what does love look like when we are the ones
or remain complicit with those who have done the harm?

How might we weave a tapestry with the words of Luke and the words attributed to Paul in his first letter to the church of Corinth –

31 Do to others as you would have them do to you.
36 Be merciful, just as (God) is merciful.
37 "Do not judge, and you will not be judged;
do not condemn, and you will not be condemned.
Forgive, and you will be forgiven;
38 give, and it will be given to you.
A good measure, pressed down, shaken together,
running over, will be put into your lap;
for the measure you give will be the measure you get back."

1 Corinthians 13:4-8 (NRSV)
4 Love is patient; love is kind;
love is not envious or boastful or arrogant 5 or rude.
It does not insist on its own way;
it is not irritable or resentful;
6 it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth.
7 It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.
8 Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end.

How do we, if we believe these words to be truth, move from mere words to actions of love and change?

How do we have humility and grace,
not rejoice in nor be jailed by the wrongdoing of others,
believe in the power of love.
and be mindful of how we love ourselves,
believe that our giving will be blessed –
a good measure, pressed down, shaken together,
running over,
practice forgiveness
as a means to seed forgiveness of our own transgressions,
stop running from hard truths
and see that our repentance and change
– our living amends –
can set us free,
and learn that love is more long lasting
than our words, lives, wisdoms and proclamations.
That's a tall order!
But these are necessary parts of our growth, our discipleship, our faith.

Love is Divine Power –
To be taken in and shared out!

If that all seems too confusing to process,
I'll offer the prayer that one of my sponsors gave to me
when I was wrestling with how to forgive someone's actions who felt to me to be unforgiveable.

I was told to pray for those who I held in my resentment vault.

Do you have a resentment vault?
It might be dusty with old resentments – ones you've refused to think about for years!
Ones you thought might have disintegrated by now.
Old hurts that still secretly guide your actions –
old fears, old wounds and scars that you hardly even notice anymore.

Those who had done me harm,
people and institutions –
things I was taught by people who didn't know any better,
that were probably also operating from old ideas that they'd been taught, but never interrogated.
The pains of neglect or isolation and those I felt responsible for them;
the physical and mental scars of childhood
that seemed to lead me to replicate those same relationship dynamics in adulthood.

I couldn't see how I could pray for these people, with any integrity.
I didn't even want to dredge up those memories or thoughts.

My sponsor, Bill L. may he rest in peace,
reminded me that my well-being was in my hands and my responsibility.
He told me that my freedom and joy could be unbound from those things, if I dared to confront them.

Then he told me to say this prayer,
with as much sincerity as I could muster –
"God, please give this person, institution, situation,
exactly what you think they/it deserves!

That moment of taking their crime,
punishment and worth out of my jurisdiction freed me!

Whatever God had for them I wished it to be so.
I prayed for it!
It took me from playing God
and designing what I thought they had coming,
to trusting God and knowing that mercy flows in many directions.

Love is sometimes quite complicated –
Roses and thorns and all that kind of thing.
But Divine Love that surpasses all understanding, is just that – beyond my understanding.
But not beyond my power to pray for.

My final words for today –
set them free, so that you can be free!

Because you deserve to be free –
Free to live without the ghosts of your past haunting your new days;
Free to love without fear that all love is a return to old hurts;
Free to love knowing that you, like all of creation,
can have bright new spring times that will follow your winters;
Free to breathe in a new breath and exhale the old;
Free to be all that God desires you to be in this moment;
Free to open your hand and let God put something new in your palm!

Free people, free people! Amen.