

## **7/18/10 Sermon**

“99 Love Me and One Does Not”

Shelley Nagrani, Speaker

There is a room of 100 people. 99 of them love me. One does not. Who I am and how I behave in that room is one way of measuring how I have changed and am changing on my life's journey. This room is often about how worthy of love I feel. The journey can be defined in many ways:

- I am becoming the person I want to be.
- I am becoming the person I was meant to be.
- I am moving closer to god.
- I am embracing the god in me.
- I am working out past karma and building up good karma for the next stage.
- I am learning the lessons that I was put on this planet to learn.
- I am following the path laid by god, who loves me and has a mysterious plan that is not at all what it looks like.
- I am breaking down the separation between my ego self and the divine of which I am a part.
- I am learning to accept and love myself unconditionally.
- I am learning to accept and love others unconditionally.

On this journey, I walk into the room of 100 people. 99 of them love me. One does not. Upon reflection, I would say that my earliest behavior showed that I agreed with the one who did not love me. Not only did I agree with you, I would show you some truly unlovable behavior to confirm your feelings toward me. Because I was a girl, raised in the 1950's and had been well conditioned in social norms, no matter how bad I was, my destructive behavior could never be toward you. It had to be self inflicted. And I was a teen in the 1960's, which provided me with many tools of self destruction.

As I progressed on my journey, when I walked into that room, I would ignore the 99 people who loved me and would spend all my energy on the one who did not love me. Anyone who has been (and I mean this figuratively) dragged across the floor, clutching the ankle of a parent or lover or minister or group, who is trying to move on with her/his/their lives, sobbing, “Please don't leave me,” can relate to this phase. It is not in the least about actually loving that person or group. It is about needing them to

prove that I am worthy of their love. If you do not love me, then I am unlovable. And that one person who I was consumed with loving me was, of course, completely incapable or simply disinterested. I spent years in this phase, finding relationships that gave me an opportunity to try and change the other person into someone who loved me.

Finally, I came into my own power. That was when I learned that I could walk into the room and ignore the one who does not love me. Instead, I would talk to as many of the other 99 as I could, getting them to agree that you were wrong and I was right. I would organize my team and get you kicked out of that room. Then everyone in the room would love me, except for those who felt invisible and manipulated because, really, it was still all about that one who does not love me. Among the 99, there would be some who would choose to leave the room because they felt that *their* love had been rejected in *my* quest to be completely loved.

Let me pause for a moment and remind myself that this is not a linear journey. There are still moments, or even days, when I revisit that room, acting exactly in the ways described above. Or there may be variations, like when I combine a little self destruction with the team building exercise. However, the overall movement is the journey that I named earlier. And that journey, naturally, changes how I am in the room.

So, the next phase that I can clearly identify is the one in which I had earned the right to ignore the one who does not love me. I had gained wisdom from those who shared with me that they did not appreciate being used in my efforts against the one who did not love me. In this phase of the journey, I began to focus on those who did love me, accepting their love, reveling in their love, delighting in it. I made a great show of how loved I was so that the one who did not love me would see how very wrong she was. Alas, as I look back on it, I can see that this phase was, in its way, still about how I was not lovable, how I was unworthy. I was making a show of how I was loved to prove that I was lovable.

In the next phase, I was able to not enter that room at all. I had discovered god. I am a child of god and, therefore, completely perfect and completely loved. My sister and I argued about this point, as she was an atheist. She kept asking me, "If there is a god, how is it that such horrible things could be happening to people?" I told her that we are unable to see god's divine plan. What seems horrible – even catastrophic – had purpose, which would be revealed at a later time. But I was conflicted in this belief. I could not apply it universally. How could god allow women in Muslim countries to be buried up to their chest and slowly stoned to death? How could boys be kidnapped and coerced into being killers in Rwanda? Why did god create

opium poppies and plants for manufacturing cocaine? If god is love, if we are the children of god, how could so many things be happening to god's children that are too unspeakable to name?

The story of Job in the Bible provides one explanation. God boasts to the devil that Job loves him. Perhaps, at that time, god was in the phase of making a great show of how lovable he was. At any rate, the devil says, "Prove it," and god inflicts incredible pain on Job. God kills Job's wives and children, takes away all his stuff, even gives him boils, all with the devil egging him on by saying, "That doesn't really prove that Job loves you. Make it worse!" And god does, and Job continues to love god, no matter what. In the end, Job is rewarded with much better stuff, new wives and even more children (apparently wives and children were pretty interchangeable), gets his health back and lives for a very long time, secure in the knowledge that god had a plan to give him a better life.

There are many things seriously disturbing about this story. For our purposes today, let's focus on the fact that Job believed that the pain he experienced was all about a plan that god had to improve his life. In fact, god was just trying to prove god's lovability to the devil and used Job to do it. It is horrifying to think that an omnipotent being would use that power to do exactly what I would do on a smaller scale – use others to prove how lovable I am. If an omnipotent being needs to do that, what hope is there for the rest of us? How could this be?

The way that I reconciled my doubts was to make the belief totally personal. My personal higher power had a loving plan for me. As to whether or not there was a plan for everyone else, I could not say. I had proof of god's plan. My proof was that, as difficult as my life has been, I am delighted by where I am now. God must have had a plan to get me here. Clearly, I could have come no other way. For years, my mantra of great comfort has been, "I could have come no other way."

Then, a few years ago, my husband, Ashok, gave me a GPS. Now that GPS has saved me hours of wandering aimlessly around, wasting time and gas. It has brought me confidence in my travels and kept me from being frustrated and late. I can rely on my GPS to guide me, even when I have no idea of where I am. However, there have been occasions on which my GPS has told me, with great confidence, how to get where I am going and I have known, for a fact, that there was a better way to get there. I have found myself saying to the GPS, "There is a better way to get to that place."

My GPS has shaken my faith. Maybe I could have come some other way! I am extremely content in my life with Ashok. It is close to perfect. But now

that the GPS has shaken my core beliefs, I am realizing that I *could* have had this life without having to go through every single painful moment that I lived. I am pretty certain that Ashok would love the "me" that he encountered even if I had not had acne in my painful adolescence or had not taken LSD, one of life's truly horrifying experiences.

I have a purpose driven life, which is satisfying beyond measure. There are women and children alive today, at least in part, because of the work I have done. My own experience as a battered wife and victim of sexual assault, while obviously terrifying at the time, created the passion that I bring to my work. But did it have to be both domestic violence and sexual assault? Wouldn't one terrifying and humiliating experience have been sufficient? Did I have to become estranged from my mother through the manipulations of the batterer? Isn't it likely that I would have been just as passionate about my work with her in my life?

I am a person who does not pass judgment on others – unless they are on cable TV or talk radio or in elected office. But, truly, when I observe someone acting in a self-destructive manner, I feel tremendous compassion for them. I know that I have no idea of what led them to treat themselves as they do. I know that because of the self-destructive behavior in which I engaged, which had nothing to do with moral fiber or self discipline. I am grateful that I am able to bring compassion and empathy into my relationships. But did I have to be quite as self destructive as I was to gain that compassion? Was every single thing along this way really necessary?

As sometimes happens with my GPS, as much as I believe in a power greater than myself, I think that I could have come some other way. So the next phase seemed to be to step into that room in which 99 people love me and one does not love me and not engage them around that issue. The evolved approach is to love myself, regardless of how anyone else feels about me. This love of self is approached on many levels. All of us have heard, "You need to love yourself before you can love others." I am sorry, but this is simply not true. I know lots of parents whose actions tell me that they do not love themselves, but they are deeply and totally in love with their children. Also, there are people we just love, regardless of our feelings about ourselves. Martin Luther King Jr. comes to mind. Or, if we need a more accessible example, think about Diantha Horton. I do not need to love myself before I can love Diantha.

The level with which we, at UUMAN, are more familiar is striving in a more spiritual way to love ourselves. We find our "shadow selves" and learn to embrace them. We meditate to let go of that which makes us unlovable. We connect with community and love ourselves as part of this community

and for our interconnectedness. We practice self acceptance. We strive for a new state of being – a state that is worthy of love.

That practice, that striving, is the basis for a good life, meaning a life of goodness. As we learn to accept ourselves, as we find ourselves increasingly worthy of love, we can let go of the need for the one who does not love us, as well as the 99 that love us. We have the ability to engage in acts of love, both as giver and as receiver,

At this phase of my life, that is what matters. Ashok says that love is duty. While I may not be in that space entirely, I have to acknowledge that viewing love as a verb, as action, is what feels most important to me these days. What does it really matter that you love me? What does it even mean that you love me? For that matter, what does it mean that god loves me? Does god's love make my life, or anyone's life, better? No. It is our own action of living the sort of life that we believe honors our connection with spirit that makes that life better.

What does it mean that you love me or do not love me? I really don't know. I will tell you what has great meaning to me, however. This spring, I went through cancer. I was totally astounded by the abundant acts of kindness from this community, as well as others in my life. I had get-well cards all around my room. I ate wonderful food, lovingly prepared by friends. There were calls, prayers, and emails. When Ashok and I shared in Joys and Concerns, we were inundated with words of comfort and support. All of these acts of kindness helped me to heal.

Do you love me? What does it matter? You committed acts of loving kindness. It could have had nothing to do with your feelings about me. You could have given me tea and candles and ratatouille because you enjoy being loving people. How could your underlying feelings about me change my experience of these as acts of loving kindness?

At this phase of my life, I know that when I walk into that room of 100 people, it makes no difference how many love or how many do not. What matters is how I treat them. That is all about where I am on my journey. What matters is how they treat me, and that is all about where they are on their journey. Do I take things personally? Absolutely. I am a person. I am a person who, at least for now, can focus my attention on acts of loving kindness instead of worrying about whether I am worthy of love or not. I can commit those acts and I can accept those acts. At least for now, on my journey love is a verb. Let us do love together.