

2/14/10 Sermon

"Elvis, Prophet of Love"

Rev. Paul D. Daniel, Minister

*Love me tender, Love me sweet, Never let me go.
You have made my life complete, And I love you so.*

*Love me tender, Love me true, All my dreams fulfill.
For my darling, I love you, And I always will.*

*Love me tender, Love me long, Take me to your heart.
For it's there that I belong, And we'll never part.*

*Love me tender, Love me dear, Tell me you are mine.
I'll be yours through all the years, Till the end of time.*

*Love me tender, Love me true, All my dreams fulfill.
For my darling, I love you, And I always will.*

He swiveled his hips and ignited a firestorm of teenage love. We danced to "American Bandstand" and "Soul Train" because love and desire were in his hips and in the air.

But love, as we know, didn't start with Elvis. Poets throughout the ages mused about it and tried to define it. Perhaps the poet W. H. Auden defined the mystery and wonder of it as well as anyone:

*Some say that love's a little boy, and some say it's a bird,
Some say it makes the world go round, and some say that's absurd.
And when I asked the man next-door, who looked as if he knew,
His wife got very cross indeed, and said it wouldn't do.*

*Does it look like a pair of pajamas?
Or the ham in a temperance hotel?
Does its odor remind one of llamas, or has it a comforting smell?
Is it prickly to touch as a hedge is, or soft as goose down fluff?
Is it sharp or quite smooth at the edges? O, tell me the truth about love.*

*Our history books refer to it in cryptic little notes,
It's quite a common topic on the transatlantic boats.
I've found the subject mentioned in Accounts of Suicides,
And even seen it scribbled on the back of railways guides.*

*Does it howl like a hungry Alsatian, or boom like a military band?
Could one give a first-rate imitation, on a saw or a Steinway grand?
Is its singing at parties a riot? Does it only like classical stuff?
Will it stop when one wants to be quiet? O, tell me the truth about love.*

*I looked inside the summerhouse; It wasn't ever there.
I tried the Thames at Maidenhead, and Brighton's bracing air.
I don't know what the blackbird sang, or what the tulip said,
But it wasn't in the chicken run, or underneath the bed.*

*Can it pull extraordinary faces? Is it usually sick on a swing?
Does it spend all its time at the races, or fiddling with pieces of string?
Has it views of its own about money? Does it think patriotism is enough?
Are its stories vulgar but funny? O, tell me the truth about love.*

*When it comes, will it come without warning, just as I'm picking my nose?
Will it knock on my door in the morning, or tread in the bus on my toes?
Will it come like a change in the weather? Will its greeting be courteous or rough?
Will it alter my life altogether? O, tell me the truth about love.*

Well, wouldn't we all like to know "the truth of love" that the poet W. H. Auden pondered. At best, I suspect, we come to know love only in part, over time, never fully or all at once. It is feast or drought. It rides on a sea of emotions.

We know it when we experience it, or so we think. It is a choice but with a hook. Once we take the bait, it can blind us to the reality of the other, make us crazy with lust and desire, sad when we lack it or lose it. We fall in love with being in love. It is a narcotic, as addictive as cocaine or painkillers in its nature. We alternately can't live with it and then without it.

We run into its arms and then push it away. It can bring us the most sublime joy when we dwell in its embrace; in the next moment, it consumes us with rage and an aching agony – our breathing becomes labored and our vision clouded.

Love is passion, an ecstasy of the soul, a flushing of the body and a kind of divine madness. These emotions can be volatile, making us in turn anxious and afraid, then calm as it envelopes us in a safe cocoon: our parent's arms, a friend's touch of whispered support, our lover's embrace. It is the most elemental emotion vital to our sense of well-being and happiness. It is all-consuming and distracting.

Love moves us beyond the limited vision of only the beloved to a broader appreciation of what brings delight: the raging foam-capped sea; flowers in their palette of color; birds soaring high and low on the wind; music, poetry, literature that fill the heart and stimulate the mind. It is grand, it is wretched.

We oft experience love as a spontaneous emotion, giddy and delightful, terrifying and confusing. The mystic Rumi likens it to a fever, a madness that might overtake one after a night of drinking and carousing.

He writes, "I am lost in your face, in your lost eyes. The drunk and the madman inside me. This is how I would die into the love I have for you; as pieces of clouds dissolve into sunlight."

One thing seems certain – it cannot be forced. We must choose to let it in, work doubly hard to resist it, and harder still to let it go. Often it confuses us. What does he or she want? What are the rules of engagement?

Sometimes we only understand it after the relationship ends, its wreckage lying on the shore of our soul. Often, though, it is just the opposite, a moving ship on calm seas with occasional squalls. It is the sun breaking through after a storm. It is a soft cooling breeze on a sweltering day. It is an oasis in the desert. It can be momentary or enduring, a brief wild fling or a lifetime commitment.

Today, marriages are different, sometimes more like a Broadway play. They have a run of a few months or years, and then the doors are shuttered with one final performance – often with a new ending, a messy divorce.

In spite of the statistics that over half of all marriages fail, we still believe in love.

What I do know about love is that a committed relationship requires unending work, effort and attention. It is a give and take; it is compromising and holding fast. It is never losing yourself to the relationship. It is about giving all of your authentic self to the other, and accepting the risk of being hurt to the core. The work of love is demanding for it exposes our weakness and makes us vulnerable. It offers exquisite rewards but demands much: a shedding of the masks we all wear to shield ourselves from another. It calls us to let down our inner defenses and potentially let a Trojan horse into our hearts. In return it offers intimacy, connection that we all yearn for and, at its most divine, provides security and safety – and, yes, great physical and emotional pleasure.

True love is when the self is not separate from the self or the beloved. It overpowers all that separates and divides us from the holy.

I can say no more about "the truth of love." I don't know any more about it than W. H. Auden or you do. So I end as I began with uncertainty and not a bit amused, confused and bemused.

I hope that in the end Elvis was right that love will make our lives complete, our dreams fulfilled, and that we will never part. For I know – I think I do, I hope you will, "love me tender, love me true, and you always will."

In the spirit of love, I invite you to heed Elvis's words, as gift or caution. But whichever one, know this, Elvis assumes no liability for your choices about love. You're on your own.

Thank you very much.

Elvis has left the building.