

## *Fish Love*

### **A Message for All Faiths Unitarian Congregation**

**Delivered on August 19, 2018**

**By the Rev. CJ McGregor**

I wonder how many times you've been in love? I mean the kind of love where you'd let a person drive your new car when they don't have a license. Love you would lie for. Love where you overlook a lot of things about the person. Love where you don't see the literal or figurative warts on a person. Love that you take risks for. Love that you obsess over. Love that makes a night seem like a lifetime. Love that makes a summer fly. You notice I didn't ask if you've ever loved these ways. I know you have, I have. I asked how many times? The answer for us all might be, "too many times." Now think about why these loves ended. What happened? I bet it was because it was fish love. Yes, fish love.

Rabbi Abraham Twerski talks about the difference between selfish love and true love, which must be a love of giving and not of receiving. He tells this story:

*"Young man. Why are you eating that fish?" The young man says, 'Because I love fish.' He says, 'Oh. You love the fish. That's why you took it out of the water and killed it and boiled it.' He says, 'Don't tell me you love the fish. You love yourself, and because the fish tastes good to you; therefore, you took it out of the water and killed it and boiled it.'"*

Rabbi Twerski believes that so much of what is love is fish love. He says, "Young couple falls in love. Young man and young woman fall in love. What does that mean? That means that he saw in this woman someone who he felt could provide him with all his physical and emotional needs, and she felt in this man somebody she feels that she can right or form, that was love, but each one is looking out for their own needs. It's not love for the other. The other person becomes a vehicle for my gratification." I don't have the heart to tell Rabbi Twerski that this is how I feel about cake. I'm in fish love with cake.

He says, "Too much of what is called love is fish love. An external love is not on what I'm going to get but what I'm going to give." There is an ethicist, Rabbi Dessler, who said, 'People make a serious mistake in thinking that you give to those whom you love, and the real answer is you love those to whom you give.' His point is if I give something to you, I've invested myself in you. Since self-love is a given, everybody loves themselves, now that part of me has become in you, there's part of me in you that I love. True love is a love of giving, not a love of receiving.

There is someone I love more than cake and that is my husband. How important Richard must feel that he comes before cake. Well, most of the time. We all know that relationships and practicing true love is complicated and tricky. I know I've struggled in this area myself. I wonder if you have or are struggling now. I've struggled on and off in my twenty-seven-year relationship with fish love. I've found myself loving Richard for what he could offer me and easily putting my needs first. If I'm not careful I can be a bit self-centered and I refuse to use the

N word—narcissistic. As a child I needed to consider myself, my needs, my safety because no one else was doing it. I, along with adults in my life as a child and teen, trained myself to consider myself first. As an adult this translates to self-centeredness. I know what you're thinking, "CJ this can't be true! You're such a giver and a lover!" I know. I know. The truth is that if we, all of us, aren't conscious of loving those to whom we give rather than giving to whom we love we are at risk of fish love.

Does that make sense? It didn't to me the first time I heard it either! Let's unpack it. Rabbi Twerski says the key to real love is giving, and that you don't give to those you love but rather end up loving those you give to. And, that phrasing doesn't quite sit right with me, but it's closer than anything I can come up with. There exists a real generosity in people that is accessed through giving.

We make a mistake thinking we give to those we love. Think about the man eating the fish. He thought he loved fish, but there he was boiling and eating it for his personal satisfaction. Has anyone ever told you that they felt you were taking them for granted? Or have you ever told someone that they were taking you for granted? If you've been on either end of this then you understand fish love, thinking you are giving love. Granted as an adjective means "given," and it usually follows "take for" or "taken for." If you take someone for granted, you count on that person, but you may not always show your appreciation. Are you still with me? The real answer, true love, is you love those to whom you give. Think about the man eating the fish. If he truly loved fish he would have genuinely appreciated the fish instead of boiling and eating it. Are you able to see the difference between fish love and true love? It is simply this: Love without care for the other person's lived experience is not love, it is self-love or fish love.

There is nothing transcendental about fish love. And, we can grow very cynical. Does love—real love, generous love—even exist, or is there only self-love? I served as hospice chaplain in Massachusetts and think hospice helped me get out of the cycle of self-love and cynicism. It's a strange thing, to want to sit with the dying—often a very selfish thing. I can't speak to other's motivations, but I know my own motivations were selfish. I decided to work for hospice because I wanted to feel like a good person, because I wanted to understand more about death, and because I wanted to do something meaningful. It's selfish in a way that people in our culture generally aren't selfish, but it was selfish nonetheless. And, in some of my fellow hospice workers, I did often see a similar selfishness to my own—but, I began to see something else too. The people who had been doing it for a long time, for years, began to bring another quality of love to the surface. A non-self-love.

As chaplain I was available to not only the person dying and their family, but for the staff as well, I remember one of the women who I worked with. She was regularly sitting with a dying woman, a tiny, grumpy woman, who rarely wanted company. But, she let the volunteer come to visit her sometimes and they developed a relationship. Near the end of the woman's life, the volunteer told her that she loved her, and when that happened, something shifted. Having received love, she suddenly found herself in a place to give it. She opened up to her family, told all the people who she'd pushed away and wouldn't see that she loved them, and made peace with all her beloved.

A few days later while we were at her bedside the woman died. But, that whole expression of love was so hopeful for me. The volunteer didn't have much to gain from loving this tiny grumpy woman, she had nothing to gain from expressing her love, but for some reason she did anyway. It was a gift—a real generous gift, of the type perhaps I didn't really believe existed.

Another quick story. I work with students at Meadville Lombard Theological School to assist them in their ministerial formation. One student serves a congregation in Jacksonville. During one of regular get togethers we were discussing ministerial authority and how a congregation grows to trust their minister. He was confused about what to do. In the end I told him, "Tell them you love them." You see, he was doing all the right things, but the congregation didn't know he loved them. The difference between give to those you love-fish love and love to those you give-true love.

I wanted to offer today's message because our current model of love reduces it to something rapacious and we may not even be conscious of it. As Unitarian Universalists love is our doctrine. Our ministry, our beliefs, our lives are set in love. Let us keep on until we find true love. Oh, by the way, I love you. Please turn to Hymn # 95 There Is More Love Somewhere.

May it be so.