



“Exploring a Spiritual Triangle”

October 27, 2024



Opening Words

The reading is a portion of a short article by the Rev. Jim Rigby, a Presbyterian minister in Austin, Texas entitled “The Living Heart of Religion.”

Lovers of humankind seek to liberate us, not to make us obedient to religious hierarchy. The founders of great faiths come to awaken our minds, not to suffocate the torch of reason under bushels of dogma and platitudes...

The living pulse of religion is restored by returning to our own trembling questions, not to someone else’s unblinking answers.

If we cannot question the dogma and disobey the hierarchy of any religion, we are called by all that is sacred to flee without turning back, lest we be turned into incurious and unfeeling pillars of salt.

The living heart of religion is not found in its institutions, creeds or rituals, but only in its revolutionary love.

Reflections:

HEY, WHAT AM I DOING HERE

The Rev. Al Lumpkin

I wanted to share a bit of perspective on my spiritual journey before this morning's sermon. I didn't intend the title to be provocative – well maybe a little. At the end of December, 2022, I formally retired from ministry in two rural congregations. I had conducted services for 41 years in one and 15 in the other. So I needed to choose a community for my next chapter. This morning's prelude was about Joe Jenck's realization, after he nearly drowned, that he needed a community of fellow travelers. So do I.

My active ministry, including internships, residencies, part-time assignments and the Geisinger chaplaincy spanned just over 61-½ years. In addition to parish and hospital ministry, I'd had the opportunity to work in maximum security prisons, a mental hospital and an outpatient counseling center in a journey that led me to Geisinger. For me, it's been a rewarding and gratifying ride.

A part of my decision has to do with Jeanie's 33-year involvement in UUCSV and the fact that I've been a kind of honorary traveler from back in the King Street Coffeehouse days. There are two other major reasons for me to be here. I remember a conversation with the Rev. John Ickes, who served UUCSV in the early 90's. I was curious about how a retired Lutheran pastor found his way to this then-fledgling Unitarian congregation. "Al," he said, "From the beginning of my ministry I've been aware of two theological streams. One was all the religion *about* Jesus - those complex debates that led to the dogmas and creeds. The other, the religion *of* Jesus, was much more clear and important for me. I think that's why I feel so comfortable here because that seems to fit."

The other factor in my being here has to do with the interfaith nature of chaplaincy. I was certified as a pastoral educator in 1975. During the following years I taught in intensive, small groups limited to six students, each of whose pastoral experience I supervised weekly. Seminary students applied to the Geisinger School of Pastoral Care for their first experience of ministry. Area pastors and serious laypersons signed on for part-time programs. Our resident chaplains were experienced clergy who came for two years of training that qualified them for certification as chaplains or enabled them to re-tool with skills they needed for the parish. Each of these learning groups was diverse. Students ranged from Pentecostal, Nazarene, Seventh Day Adventists to the mainline Lutheran, Methodist, Presbyterian, United Church of Christ, and American Baptist denominations. There were Roman Catholic priests and sisters, Orthodox priests, Rabbis and Unitarian Universalists. The diversity was so rich. You might think there would be

culture clashes around those religious differences, but that conflict was rare. The shared task of seeking ways to reach out to people in crisis seemed to create respect, and it became clear that we had the most to learn from where were different.

So, in a word, these experiences bring me here. Two things are very clear to me. At this time in my life I need a community, and the freedom of the diversity here is precious to me.

Meditation in Words and Silence

Translation of 1 Corinthians 13 by The Rev. Eugene Peterson

13 If I speak with human eloquence and angelic ecstasy but don't love, I'm nothing but the creaking of a rusty gate.

2 If I speak God's Word with power, revealing all his mysteries and making everything plain as day, and if I have faith that says to a mountain, "Jump," and it jumps, but I don't love, I'm nothing.

3-7 If I give everything I own to the poor and even go to the stake to be burned as a martyr, but I don't love, I've gotten nowhere. So, no matter what I say, what I believe, and what I do, I'm bankrupt without love.

Love never gives up. Love cares more for others than for self. Love doesn't want what it doesn't have. Love doesn't strut, Doesn't have a swelled head, Doesn't force itself on others, Isn't always "me first," Doesn't fly off the handle, Doesn't keep score of the sins of others, Doesn't revel when others grovel, Takes pleasure in the flowering of truth, Puts up with anything, Trusts

God always, Always looks for the best, Never looks back, But keeps going to the end.

8-10 Love never dies. Inspired speech will be over some day; praying in tongues will end; understanding will reach its limit. We know only a portion of the truth, and what we say about God is always incomplete. But when the Complete arrives, our incompletes will be canceled.

11 When I was an infant at my mother's breast, I gurgled and cooed like any infant. When I grew up, I left those infant ways for good.

12 We don't yet see things clearly. We're squinting in a fog, peering through a mist. But it won't be long before the weather clears and the sun shines bright! We'll see it all then, see it all as clearly as God sees us, knowing him directly just as he knows us!

13 But for right now, until that completeness, we have three things to do to lead us toward that consummation: Trust steadily in God, hope unswervingly, love extravagantly. And the best of the three is love.

Sermon: "Exploring a Spiritual Triangle" by Rev. Al Lumpkin

EXPLORING A SPIRITUAL TRIANGLE

Sermon by the Rev. Al Lumpkin

It was the words that grabbed me. I have this childhood memory of hearing someone read 1st Corinthians 13 in early King James English, “Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not charity, I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal. And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge; and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not charity, I am nothing. And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, and have not charity, it profiteth me nothing.”

What was it that made those words connect with me? Maybe it was the dynamic way it was read or the poetic quality of the words. I’m not sure, but I recall *really* hearing them. As I came back to that passage, I began to see how it moves issues of faith from enclosed religious walls into the center of our life itself. It’s practical and down to earth. The words speak about a love that isn’t arrogant or greedy, love that reaches out to others, perseveres, doesn’t seek to dominate or find fault, cherishes truth, is filled with compassion. These are rather prophetic words for this time when many of us find ourselves struggling with what’s going on in the world around us.

1 Corinthians 13 comes to us from a man from the city of Tarsus named Saul, who later became known as the Apostle Paul. In most of his writings, Paul worked at documenting the religion *about* Jesus, attempting to define early Christian doctrine. But this rich chapter is different. Here he seems to connect with the core of the religion *of* Jesus.

Revisiting and reflecting on this passage, I began to conceptualize it as three sides of an equilateral spiritual triangle – three equal sides connected at equal angles. You can't alter any one of the three without affecting the other two. So it is with faith, hope and love. Paul is saying the three are connected and fit together and move together at the center of one's spiritual life. Having said this, it seems important for me to at least to point toward what I mean about these three powerful streams that flow in human experience.

Paul begins with faith. Each Sunday at UUCSV, we welcome people of “free faith” – “free faith,” I find myself drawn to these two words which declare that faith is something far deeper than complex doctrines, dogma or the creeds defined by some council. Faith is something that emerges within us as we learn and grow. Surely faith does include what we come to believe deeply and cherish highly, but it is something more.

Some will see faith in the boldness of the spiritual: “Hold on, hold on, keep your hand on the plow, hold on!” Certainly determination has its place, but I've been drawn to a different definition of faith implied in the NT Greek word *pistis*. One of its core meanings is “to place in trust.” To place in trust, a person must let go. Hmmm. So how can faith manifest as the ability to let go?

I remember Kahlil Gibran's words from *The Prophet*, “Your children are not your children,” he says. “They are the sons and daughters of Life's longing for itself... You may house their bodies but not their souls, For their souls dwell in the house

of tomorrow, which you cannot visit, not even in your dreams.” Our children teach us that we must learn to let go.

Speaking of faith as letting go may seem strange! Perhaps faith is more a verb than a noun. Some theologians suggest maybe it’s more accurate to speak of “faithing.” In other words, faith is about learning to *embrace* life as a gift, seeking out its many dimensions of meaning, an exploration that enables us to live and not just exist. Letting go is all about accepting life as it is, rather than as we would wish it to be. Faith is about learning to live with gratitude, even when difficult times swirl around us.

That thought seems to provide a segway to some ideas about hope. When I say hope, many folks might hear it as optimism. I sometimes recall when I was young, around 7 or 8 I think, living in Richmond, Virginia. We had a spacious back yard. That place was a center for me. It had bases for baseball, and my grandfather had built a tree stand for me. Life felt comfortable and safe there. Our family had a subscription to the *Saturday Evening Post* – I remember the Norman Rockwell covers, and I read stories inside that I loved because they always had a happy ending. I loved the happy endings!

But life is not all happy endings. Paul writes, “when I was a child, I thought, spoke and acted as a child, but when I became an adult, I had to put aside childish ways.” So when we open our eyes to life’s struggles, where do we find hope? In the mid 1960's, Thomas Merton wrote a book titled *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*. When I read it, one thought jumped out to me. Merton said something like “Sometimes in life we get enough

light to take a step, and when we take that step, we find the light for the next step, and when we take that step. . .”

In my 30 years of specialized ministry, my students and I walked through valleys with folks who were facing “one step at a time” moments. Life is a risk experience for all of us. We often spoke with folks who didn’t know quite how they would face what was happening. These were people who wouldn’t claim to be intrepid or strong, but who faced painful moments with courage. I think that’s a good definition for hope – the sense that in whatever painful moments, we will find what we need. It’s, “I can make it, even if it’s one step at a time, I will make it.”

And what is Love, and how does it connect with faith and hope? We sense that love lies at the heart of spiritual life. But how? What is this abiding love that shows up in so much of our music? We may be tempted to define love as a feeling, but what Paul describes in 1st Corinthians is much more. To be sure, love contains all kinds of feelings.

At the simplest level, love is a verb. It’s something we do when we reach out to someone. One of my colleagues used to observe that people don’t bless each other nearly enough. “It’s strange,” he said, “that we don’t find ways to reach out to someone and say, ‘You matter. You’re somebody to me.’” We all need to matter. That’s why random and sometimes seemingly wasteful or reckless acts of kindness can be incredibly redemptive. So love is a decision, the choice to give generously of oneself, especially when someone needs that presence and care.

At another level, love is a capacity, an ability that grows as we dare to reach out to those around us. I keep going back to my early years. In junior high, I was 1st chair in the french horn section in the All-City Junior High Orchestra of Richmond. In my early 30's, re-connecting with my biological father, I mentioned that I played the french horn. For Christmas that year, his present to me was a retired high school horn he had found and restored. So I picked it up, placed the mouthpiece in and, in the next 5 minutes, I learned that I used to play french horn.

Love is like that, it seems to me. The more we dare to *practice* it, to reach out to others with compassion, caring and respect, giving our time and our attention, the capacity to love grows. I mentioned Thomas Merton earlier. Merton had a compelling definition of love. "Love is our true destiny. We do not find the meaning of life by ourselves alone. We find it with another. Love seeks one thing only: the good of the one loved." If for any reason we close those doors, the capacity to love seems to recede- to shrink.

I have one more thought. There are so many ways that love comes from beyond ourselves, from the Divine, and certainly from others. Once I was writing a column about how parents might teach their children to give, and I was kind of stuck. John Gerdes, my friend who practiced psychology at Geisinger, stopped by my office, and we chatted about my writer's block. "I have a thought," he said. "Maybe if we teach our children to receive gratefully, graciously, when they grow up they will know how to give."

Sometimes a sermon needs a “so what” conclusion. My “so what” today is that this spiritual triangle, faith, hope and love, endures throughout our lives as core dimensions by which we grow. At different times, we will find ourselves working at one of them. When an intense experience challenges some core belief or value, then we very well may find that the edges of our faith must shift. When our lives come to trying and painful moments, the reaching out for hope may take us through difficult and narrow, “one step at a time” passages. And love. You know, giving and receiving are parts of the same reality. But to give of oneself or to receive another’s gifts isn’t always easy. Choosing to be generous can be a struggle; it may involve a risk.

So abide faith, hope and love. When we find ourselves working on one of the edges of this spiritual triangle, change happens in each of the others. That’s how we grow in spirit. The writer, Paul, declares that there are three things that abide, that are so fundamental that they last – faith, hope and love. And the greatest of these is love.

Closing Words by Al Lumpkin

I calligraphed a statement and framed it for the pastoral care office. It says “Be Kind and gentle, Life is difficult, and sometimes people don’t have much more than what they need.”