

**Reading:** "Our reading this morning is First Love by Denise Levertov

It was a flower.

There had been, before I could even speak, another infant,  
Girl or boy, unknown, who drew me – I had an obscure desire to become connected in  
some way to this other,  
Even to *be* what I faltered after,  
Falling to hands and knees, crawling a foot or two,  
Clambering up to follow further  
Until arms swooped down to bear me away.  
But that one left no face, had exchanged no gaze with me.

This flower: suddenly there was *Before I saw it*,  
The vague past, and *Now*. Forever.  
Nearby was the sandy sweep of the Roman Road,  
And where we sat  
The grass was thin.  
From a bare patch of that poor soil, solitary,  
Sprang the flower, face upturned,  
Looking completely, openly into my eyes.

I was barely old enough to ask and repeat its name.

"Convolvulus," said my mother.  
Pale shell-pink, a chalice no wider across than a silver sixpence.

It looked at me, I looked back,  
Delight filled me as if I, not the flower, were a flower and were brimful of rain.  
*And there was endlessness.*  
Perhaps through a lifetime  
What I've desired has always been to return to that endless giving and receiving,  
The wholeness of that attention,  
That once-in-a-lifetime  
Secret communion."

Surprised By Love  
Finding It in Some Unlikely Places  
Rev. Kathleen Owens  
Feb. 7 and 8, 2009

Sermon titles are important. One can get a good size crowd when 'Sex' is in the  
title – like last week's sermon (and if you missed last week – be sure to listen to it on line

or on a CD – it's worth your time). If you have 'Love' in the title – maybe not so big a crowd...after all, love is what you're supposed to hear in church. The catch for this sermon is the subtitle – what's "the unlikely places" about? I want to be clear here – I mean unlikely, verses in all the wrong places as the country song goes...but because I don't want that song in my head all day, I'll stop here.

Have you ever been surprised by love? Maybe you have...the romantic kind of love; perhaps you were surprised meeting someone in a hallway, or reuniting with an old classmate or maybe you were surprised by a friend and some tender act. There are other stories of romantic love, I'm sure and I hope you all have a story like that...I hope you don't have a story like this one: on a vacation to Hawaii, Steve, "a carefully organized and frugal man had reserved compact rental cars on each of the four islands months in advance. On arriving to the Big Island and presenting their reservation to the car rental desk, Steve and Pam were told that the car they had reserved was not available. Alarmed, Pam watched her husband's face redden as he prepared to do battle. 'I am so sorry, sir.' the clerk said. 'Will you accept a substitute for the same price? We have a Mustang convertible.' Barely mollified, Steve put their bags in this beautiful white sports car and they drove off.

"The same thing happened throughout their holiday. They would turn in their car and fly to the next island, only to be told that the car they had been promised was not available and offered a same-price substitution. It was amazing, Pam said. After the Mustang, they had been given a Mazda MR-10, a Lincoln Town Car and finally, a Mercedes, all with the most sincere apologies. The vacation was absolutely wonderful and on the plane back, she turned to her husband, thanking him for all he had done to

arrange such a memorable time. 'Yes,' he said, pleased, 'it was really nice. Too bad they never had the right care for us.' He was absolutely serious."<sup>1</sup>

But what about being surprised by love that isn't of the romantic kind? "It was a flower (as Levertov writes,) . . ."This flower: suddenly there was *Before I saw it*, the vague past and *Now*. Forever. Nearby was the sandy sweep of the Roman Road, and where we sat the grass was thin. From a bare patch of that poor soil, solitary, sprang the flower, face upturned, looking completely, openly into my eyes."<sup>2</sup> Surprised by love indeed. How too often we get caught up in our own plans, our thinking and the rut of our minds – we reserved a compact car and instead given a luxurious one – only to be somewhat disgruntled we didn't get what we asked for...even when given something better. We are fascinating creatures, yes? If we move through our lives in that way, with that mindset, how open are we to being caught, captured even by a flower. To witness the miracle growing out of poor soil – there to dazzle us, to hold us in beauty for a moment – surprised by love, in an unlikely place.

This earth can be a harsh place to live – (a tip to Darwin here in this 200 year celebration of his birth) natural selection, survival of fittest; biology and nature can seem cruel from our sensibilities – and yet every being needs to eat, and will fight to survive. A hawk will kill a cute little mouse for his dinner. A lion will attack a deer. And we, in our animal bodies are not that much different. Sometimes we can get caught up in our own competition of survival, of stepping over others on our way to succeeding. Trapped in that way of being, we can easily miss the other qualities of love, the more gentle (and fierce) aspects of beauty that surprise us.

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<sup>1</sup> From Kitchen Table Wisdom, Stories That Heal by Rachel Naomi Remen, M.D., 1996, page 176.

<sup>2</sup> "First Love" from the Denise Levertov reading.

"Abou Ben Adhem (may his tribe increase!) awoke one night, from a deep dream of peace, and saw within the moonlight in his room, making it rich, and like a lily in bloom, an angel writing in a book of gold: exceeding peace had made Ben Adhem bold, and to the presence in the room he said, 'What writest thou?' – The vision raised its head, and with a look made of all sweet accord, answered, 'the names of those who love the lord.' 'And is mine one?' said Abou. 'Nay, not so,' replied the angel. Abou spoke more low, but cheerily still; and said, 'I pray thee, then, write me as one that loves his fellow-men.' The angel wrote, and vanished. The next night it came again with a great awakening light, and showed the names whom love of God had blessed and lo! Ben Adhem's name led all the rest!"<sup>3</sup>

Maria wasn't active in the social justice work in her church. It wasn't that she didn't care – she just wasn't that angry and really didn't like marching in the streets, attending rallies that left her feeling more drained and defeated than energized and ready for action. She did care about what was happening in the world and she had sons for whom she wanted to be a good example. Maybe that was what compelled her into action more than anything else – the need to demonstrate, live and practice her values in front of her kids. She wanted to do something and so she joined the knitting group. They were knitting hats and scarves for folks in Mongolia where it was too cold and they needed more than what they had to continue living there. She barely knew how to knit one, pearl two – but she took her needles and some yarn to the church one night. She had a hard time explaining to her boys why she was leaving the house that night but they eventually understood. Sitting in that group of folks, mostly women but a few men, they all started working on their projects without much conversation; the scarves seemed easier than the

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<sup>3</sup> From Doorways to the Soul, edited by Elisa Davy Pearmain, 1998, page 8.

hats. The leader didn't force conversation but she did talk about why they were doing this and when she hoped to send the next box to the folks who were waiting. Slowly, over the next few months, group members began talking more as they worked; a bond began to develop among them and soon Maria found herself liking these people who would give of their time, talents and energy to do something for strangers. The group leader always wove into their conversations how this act of direct service fit within the church's vision of social justice and that what they were doing was important. Over time Maria found in doing this work, that even though she never met the recipients of her scarves, hats and gloves, she was surprised, by the care she felt for these people. Both Maria and Abou cared about the people in this world and feel a communion with them.

Social justice work grounded in love, in compassion rather than urgency or anger creates in us the ability to continue in the work for the long haul. It becomes work that feeds and nurtures us as well as others. Social justice work grounded in our faith values of freedom, compassion, tolerance, and I would add even joy makes a difference. Social justice work done in this way, from this place within our spirits feels more like extending care because it's about the lives of people more than causes. And in this, we flourish. Author Zora Neale Hurston says it like this: Love makes your soul crawl out from its hiding place. I'm wondering what work you might already be involved with – and more importantly, how do you engage with it so that you too flourish...so that you come out of your hiding place and into community.

Levertov writes, "There had been, before I could even speak, another infant, girl or boy unknown, who drew me – I had an obscure desire to become connected in some way to this other, even to be what I faltered after, falling to hands and knees, crawling a

foot or two, clambering up to follow further until arms swooped down to bear me away."<sup>4</sup>

A man I'll call Jackson had been hurting for awhile; alone and feeling vulnerable, it was easier to stay away from people, especially church. It was a crisis that drove him into my office and after we talked for a time I asked him if he would like to talk with one of our lay pastoral care associates (LPCA we call them for short). He wasn't sure and I explained that they were members of the congregation who were trained to listen, to be a companion on the journey while others are going through a challenging time. If he met with an LPCA once and the visit didn't go well, he could always call or email me and say so and that would be it. He said he wasn't sure what he would say...but yes, he was willing to try. You see, his need for a listening ear was great and he decided to take a chance. I made the match (you can read more about the LPCA program in the insert in your order of service) and the man and the LPCA met. While I didn't hear back from the man, the LPCA let me know the first visit seemed to go well and that they had set up another. The visits continued on and I kept informed of them through the LPCA but never heard back from the man. The visits ended after the fifth time and I hadn't seen the man at church. Then one Sunday he came walking down through the patio and into the Meeting House. He smiled at me and grabbed my hand – thanking me. In a delighted voice he said, "I'm feeling better and I want to thank you for the LPCA. I was surprised to learn the church had this service – it never would have occurred to me to ask for something like that."

Surprised by love – from one church member to another, that people are drawn to each other to connect, to seek out communion and support. This is what living in

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<sup>4</sup> Poem "First Love" by Denise Levertov, [denise levertov selected poems](#), 2002, page 195-6.

community is all about; this is what we mean when we say in our aspiration that service is our prayer; it is something we do. Are you wanting to connect? To reach out and be actively engaged in prayer/service? The Caring Ministry team has ample opportunities for you to deepen your connection to another person, to a ministry, to living/acting out of your values.

"Perhaps through a lifetime what I've desired has always been to return to that endless giving and receiving, the wholeness of that attention, that once-in-a-lifetime secret communion."<sup>5</sup>

Love finds us, surprises us when we are about the business of our lives, doing what we love, living in harmony with the Spirit of Life. Lost in the details we can be surprised by Love, in the most unlikely places – in the kindness of strangers, the actions of another on behalf of those without voice or privilege; Love can find us through a listening ear, a compassionate act of reading aloud to someone, of sharing stories; Love, that secret communion can find us through a pet, in a flower, in a poem. May our hearts, eyes, ears – may our beings be ever open to surprises from Love; for it is all around us. May it be so.

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.