

## FOR BETTER FOR WORSE

A Sermon by Kathy Fuson Hurt  
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Ministers are strongly advised against delivering sermons on subjects they do not know well, or which they have only read about or experienced secondhand. By that standard, I should probably not be giving a sermon today exploring love and conflict. I came from a family in which conflict of any sort was forbidden, regarded as sinful, and subject to punishment. I consented to ending a marriage in divorce, which implies that conflict of some sort had reached an unbearable point for one or both parties. Add to that the fact that I am a minister, and we all know that ministers are notorious people-pleasers, averse to conflict of any sort and much too willing to tie themselves into pretzels in order to avoid alienating anyone. So what was I thinking when I selected this subject and perversely stuck with it?

Besides being a stubborn character, this seems an apt subject with Valentine's Day coming tomorrow, a healthy counterpoint to the sugar-coated sentiments that surround us just now in the culture. Love and conflict also strike me as apt subjects almost anytime in a liberal congregation made up of folks who struggle to find meaning and thus are not likely to set aside that meaning easily when challenged. And reflecting on love and conflict may be sadly appropriate when around the world we see new conflicts erupting and old conflicts moving ever farther from resolution.

Love and conflict: joining the two positions in the same breath may seem to create an oxymoron, for we expect love to dissolve conflict, to make it unnecessary. If conflict is present, that suggests love has disappeared, cast out by the anger, the willfulness, the

fear, the self-interest that drive us to engage in conflict. And love, so we are told—by religious traditions, by Hallmark cards, by parents and schoolteachers and ministers and romantic movies—overcomes conflict. That the two might coexist seems unlikely.

Most spiritual traditions include a thread of teaching and experience, often characterized as the “heart” or “love” aspect, which presents images of the spiritual life in terms of a romance between the individual soul and God. We may be most familiar with this variety of spiritual experience in the Old Testament book of Song of Solomon, whose erotic imagery almost succeeded in preventing it from being included in the Bible. For anyone accustomed to thinking about God in the usual tired terms of Supreme Being or Stern Judge or Almighty Creator, to hear God depicted as a passionate romantic intent on winning the love of a human being can be a startling experience. Rumi, the Sufi poet who has become a popular choice for readings in Unitarian Universalist settings, got himself in considerable trouble with the religious authorities of his time for imagining God as a lover who would stop at nothing to be close to the beloved, the individual human soul. While the Universalist side of our tradition never indulged in erotic imagery, it did consistently teach of Divine love as being boundless and unconquerable, believing that God never gives up on anyone. And while these spiritual images of love envisioned it as being ever passionate, ever perfect, everyone understood that human love was unable to maintain that level of perfection—but we expected it anyway.

Having officiated at more than two hundred weddings and commitment ceremonies in the course of my ministry, I have come to suspect that many couples suddenly become hard of hearing when they recite their vows. Those vows make it very clear that a relationship will wax and wane in intensity, and will likely include happiness and sorrow

in equal measure. “I take you to be my wife, my husband, my partner, to have and to hold from this day forward: for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health . . . .” In the unique circumstances that accompany a wedding day, with beautiful clothes and bouquets, with misty-eyed mothers and the endless flash of photographs being taken, perhaps the newlyweds hear only the positive side of those balanced pairs of opposites, and do not realize that the relationship is guaranteed, *from the outset*, to bring them times of sickness, of difficult financial decisions, of impoverished desire, of all the myriad kinds of suffering humans can experience, along with the wealth of pleasure and tenderness and loyalty and care they expect to enjoy. Couples may be hearing only the up side of the vows, because they seem so surprised and hurt—and tempted to quit—when the dark side the vows foretell enters their relationship.

And I have seen a similar disillusionment happen whenever people join a church, moved to do so in a burst of happiness at having found an ideal spiritual community, a true home. There comes a time, inevitably, when any church member finds himself or herself at odds with a decision being made, a course of action being set, a priority being established, a minister or staff member being chosen. Feelings intensify, arguments erupt, heated words are exchanged, and the true home no longer seems a comfortable place to be. How can churchgoing people act that way, think that way, say those things? What happened to the values we lifted up every Sunday? Aren’t church people supposed to love one another? When the alienation reaches deep enough or lasts long enough, it is seen as an indicator that it is time to go elsewhere, to find another church where such things cannot happen—or to forget about church altogether, since churches are hotbeds of hypocrites.

When you love someone you do not love them all the time, in exactly the same way, from moment to moment. It is an impossibility. It is even a lie to pretend to. And yet this is exactly what most of us demand. We have so little faith in the ebb and flow of life, of love, of relationships. We leap at the flow of the tide and resist in terror its ebb. We are afraid it will never return. We insist on permanency, on duration, on continuity, when the only continuity possible, in life as in love, is in growth, in fluidity—in freedom, in the sense that the dancers are free, barely touching as they pass, but partners in the same pattern. (Lindbergh, p. 108)

I typically invite couples I work with to select the readings they want included in their ceremonies, and one of the resources I suggest for them is Anne Morrow Lindbergh's *Gift from the Sea*. I appreciate her reflections because they expand upon the “for better for worse” of the vows, with words that both celebrate the glory of love while also reminding of its challenges and heartbreak. At several points, Lindbergh uses the image of dancers to capture the shifts and demands of relationship, “now arm in arm, now face to face, now back to back.” Like dancers, people in relationship are able to remain in relationship through the turns of music and the turns of life experience because they are “partners moving to the same rhythm, creating a pattern together and being invisibly nourished by it” (p. 194). Lindbergh believes that dancing couples and married couples, people in relationship and people in congregations, stay together through the twist of dance and of time because of that fundamental rhythm that guides the dance, and the awareness that a pattern is being created *together*. The moment I insist that my dancing partner, my friend, my fellow congregant follow my own personal pattern so that s/he is no longer part of creating the pattern together, or whenever I forget to listen for the rhythm we both are trying to follow, then the dance, the relationship, the church community, falls apart. Similarly, a dance that has only a single move repeated over and over, like a relationship that is expected to look and feel the same way, all the time, quickly loses its appeal. We know this about dancing; why is it so difficult to translate

into a knowing about our church community, our friendships, our families, our lovers? The dance includes times of intense activity and times of boredom, times of excitement and times that are dull, times that are rich and times that are stale, times that are full of passion and times that feel flat, times when the other person is desirable and times when the other person is incredibly annoying, times when solitude seems preferable to companionship. All these times come for everyone in any kind of relationship, regardless of efforts we might make to forestall them. Rather than understanding them as the normal pattern of relationship, an ebb that will be followed by a fullness, we tend to pounce on those moments of ebbing and turn them into a source of conflict.

“Why don’t we talk anymore?”

“You’re always coming home late, and you know how hard it is to fix dinner and watch the kids at the same time.”

“We used to make love so often—what happened? Don’t you want me as much?”

“I thought people in a church would care about one another, not criticize one another.”

“You just sit there and don’t say anything, but I can tell you’re mad at me.”

“We’ve always done it this way, and you need to understand that.”

“How many times do I have to tell you how crazy it makes me when you do that?”

Family therapists have noted that the issues which become sources of conflict in relationships are not of an infinite number; in fact, couples are likely to engage in conflict about only one, maybe two matters, which present themselves in different guises, over the course of time. Similarly in congregational systems, the same kind of conflict keeps cycling through, with different persons involved but getting caught in the same issue. Many of you pointed this out to me here at BUC right away in the controversy

surrounding our music staffing, lamenting how “we keep doing this, over and over.” Not surprisingly, these recurrent conflicts in relationships and in churches—in fact, nearly three-fourths of all conflicted issues—never get resolved. The issue resurfaces, the same old arguments roll out, slightly altered to be relevant to the presenting matter, and so it goes, again and again. If conflict is seen as being undesirable, an indicator of problems, and needing to be fixed, then we are doomed before we even get started. Our relationships, whether married or partnered or friends or neighbors or members of a family or members of a congregation, are shot through with irreconcilable differences. Trying to avoid conflict, we end up stifling ourselves and others so completely that we may suffocate, starved for the energy and open engagement that conflict brings. But if we try to resolve the conflict and make it go away, we may spend all our time negotiating, painstakingly defining issues and positions, banging our heads against the same wall over and over, and end up feeling like failures, hopelessly frustrated by ourselves, by those obstinate other people with whom we are at odds, by relationships that seem way too much work to be worth the trouble.

Relationships must be like islands. One must accept them for what they are here and now, within their limits—*islands, surrounded and interrupted by the sea, continually visited and abandoned by the tides. One must accept the security of . . . ebb and flow, of intermittency. Intermittency—an impossible lesson for human beings to learn. How can one learn to live through the ebb tides of one’s existence, one’s relationships? How can one learn to take the trough of the wave? It is easier to understand . . . on the beach, where the breathlessly still ebb tides reveal another life below the level which mortals usually reach . . . . Each cycle of the tide is valid; each cycle of the wave is valid; each cycle of a relationship is valid.* (pp. 108-9)

If you have ever had the pleasure of spending time by the ocean, you have likely gone out walking the beach and been drawn into looking for shells or other items washed up by the waves. Beachwalkers know that the best treasures are found during low tide, when

stretches of sand are exposed for sifting. Anne Morrow Lindbergh likens this activity, of searching for shells during low tide, to how we might manage the times when relationships seem to offer nothing but difficulty and heartache. Rather than fight those times, rather than wrestle with the other to try to force them to re-engage, rather than cast about endlessly for some elusive resolution that will smooth out the tensions, she suggests we view those times as opportunities for finding a particular kind of meaning, a special sort of satisfaction, that is only available to us when the ebb tide has come into a relationship. Taking such a tack does require patience, a willingness to let things ride, an acceptance of conflict as simply another facet of relationship and not something needing to be fixed or avoided or waved away—all difficult responses, even contrary to what we instinctively want to do.

But if we can keep those instinctive responses at bay, even for a moment, then what wonders we might find where the wave was and then receded, delicate shells, strands of seaweed, bits of life to give us heart as we wait for the sea's return. Much to our surprise, there will be more than enough.