**Monton Unitarian Church**

**Agape Love – 26th July 2020**

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**Chalice Lighting**

I’m glad we can spend this time together.

I can only guess how each of you is feeling today.

Some of you are happy to be here.

Some of you have had a rough week and almost didn’t come.

Some of you have sorrow in your hearts.

Others are celebrating a significant event.

Maybe you’re here because you are considering celebrating your marriage with us,

Or maybe you just came out of curiosity.

Whatever the reason, know that you are welcome.

May something in our worship today meet your needs and connect you with God.

As I kindle this symbol of light – our Flaming Chalice – think for a moment about why you’ve come here today, and what it is you hope this service of worship might bring.

**Welcome**

As we create and share sacred space together, let us reflect upon what brings us here. We have all come here for different reasons, from different decisions, faced different challenges and shared different love. And yet all of our differences have led us to this space, right here, right now.

Some believe we are here for a greater purpose, others hold fast to a claim of complete     coincidence. Others still lie somewhere in between. There are so many differences and barriers between each individual, it would seem at times as though the odds were stacked against us becoming one whole, as we believe different things, live and experience different things, and value and hate different things.

We are the children of God, the children of the earth, or fully grown adults here as a piece of the ongoing cycles of the universe, the children of the stars.

We all have different definitions and explanations to who or what and why we are.

Perhaps all are right. Our revelation is not sealed.

Despite all that is different, there is one thing that is certainly the same. Somehow we are all right here, right now.

We are growing and changing and discovering all here, all together, sharing the same sacred space we have shared for years, throughout generations. Constantly evolving. Constantly changing.

Let us continue.

Let us change and fight together, let us adapt together, let us grow together.

Let us worship together.

Welcome everyone to Monton Unitarian Church - the theme for this Sunday is Agape love.

**Hymn**

As we can’t sing together at this time, let me read the first two verses from number 98 of our purple hymn book, “Love will guide us”.

Love will guide us, peace has tried us,

Hope inside us, will lead the way

On the road from greed to giving.

Love will guide us through the hard night.

If you cannot sing like angels,

If you cannot speak before thousands,

You can give from deep within you.

You can change the world with your love.

**Prayer**

Spirit of Life, and Love, grant me the courage to love boldly in the face of my greatest fears. Grow me in your wisdom and let my actions speak when silence threatens justice and indifference disturbs peace. When gossip, hate, and cruelty arise among friends or in public places, help me bravely walk forward with love. When I defensively assert certainty in the presence of the unknown, grant me the courage to live comfortably in the unanswerable questions of life. Bless me with the eternal gift of not knowing and let it take root in me until it pushes forth shoots of understanding and branches of humility. Amen

**Story Adapted from Scolding the Snakes**.

Once upon a time, there was an old dog who really knew what it was to love. He was patient and kind and very happy when something good happened to someone else, even if it didn’t happen to him. The dog was never rude and didn’t brag when he had done something good. He was a very loving dog.

One day, a kitten wandered into the life of this dog. He found her cowering behind a garbage can. She was all dirty and half-starved. The kitten, though she needed help, was frightened of the dog. And she hissed and spit when the dog came near. The dog was very patient, though, and even though the kitten scratched his nose and bit his ears, he gently carried it over to his own bowl of food and let it eat every last crumb. The kitten had a full tummy now and was stronger; and when the dog tried to wash its matted fur by licking the kitten, it snapped at the dog and scratched him even harder. But the old dog’s love was patient and kind. It was not irritable. The old dog’s love did not insist on its own way. So the dog kept caring for the kitten.

Other dogs came around and looked at the raggedy kitten scratching the old dog every time he tried to help, and they told him, “Why do you bother with that dirty little kitten? Look at all the scratches it has given you! You should give up on it.” But the old dog’s love never gave up, never lost faith, and it lasted through every difficulty. So the dog kept caring for the kitten.

By the end of a week, the dog had a very sore nose and chewed-up ears, but the kitten looked much better. Its fur was clean and groomed and soft. Its little belly was plump. Its whiskers were straight, and its eyes were bright.

And the next time the other dogs came around, there sat the loving old dog: his scratches were healed, and he was happily curled around a little purring ball of a kitten. The old dog had not only saved the kitten’s life, he had also taught it how to love.

**Reading from 1 Corinthians 13**

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| If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.  Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonour others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.  Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when completeness comes, what is in part disappears. When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put the ways of childhood behind me. For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.  And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love. |

**Prayer**

God who permits freedom of thought, let that thought not go astray teach us to give love freely and to expect nothing in return, teach us to be humble and not to boast about the things we do, teach us to accept that love which is offered with grace and humility and to not be frightened to ask for love and help when we need it.

**Address**

Love is very individual, the dictionary defines it as, an intense feeling of deep affection, a great interest and pleasure in something or to feel deep affection or sexual love for (someone).

Agape love is a little different. It is not a feeling; it’s a motivation for action that we are free to choose or reject. Agape is a sacrificial love that voluntarily suffers inconvenience, discomfort, and even death for the benefit of another without expecting anything in return.

We have witnessed this throughout history, the countless people who hid Jews during the holocaust, whilst fearing the same fate as the very people they were trying to save. The Manchester and London bombings where people went into help with no thought of their own safety and in more recent times we have witnessed the doctors, nurses and carers all doing the job without thought for their own safety as we dealt with the coronavirus.

We also see this in fiction like in Star Trek when Mr. Spock says to Captain Kirk “The needs of the many outweigh the needs of the one”, as he steps into a radioactive room knowing that he was most likely giving his life to save many others; and as in Harry Potter where he knows he will have to sacrifice himself in order to save others, as he goes to fight Voldermort.

In our reading today it said “Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs.” How many times have we done something for someone expecting something in return?

The bible tells us God’s love for us is unconditional. But what if we do not believe in God?

# Can we then change the word God for the word love? I believe we can. Here is an example, “for Love so Loved the world that she gave her only begotten son”, or another one, Revelation 3:12 (NIV)says, “The one who is victorious I will make a pillar in the temple of my God. Never again will they leave it. I will write on them the name of my God and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which is coming down out of heaven from my God; and I will also write on them my new name.”

# Now if we change the word God for the Word love it says this,

**“**The one who is victorious I will make a pillar in the temple of my Love. Never again will they leave it. I will write on them the name of my Love and the name of the city of my Love, the new Jerusalem, which is coming down out of heaven from my Love; and I will also write on them my new name.”

So I do agree that God equals Love. And therefore Love is the spirit of all life, as it says in 1 Corinthians 13 1. “If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing.”

The dog in our story today did not care about the bites and scratches he received from the kitten, all he saw was an animal in distress, an animal that needed saving. Giving no thought about himself he showed the kitten agape love, which in the end paid off as the kitten learned how to love and to be loved. Even in this day and age we also need to show this kind of love to our fellow human beings.

Another example of this is in Winnie the Pooh’s “A difficult day”.

"Today was a Difficult Day," said Pooh.

There was a pause.

"Do you want to talk about it?" asked Piglet.

"No," said Pooh after a bit. "No, I don't think I do."

"That's okay," said Piglet, and he came and sat beside his friend.

"What are you doing?" asked Pooh.

"Nothing, really," said Piglet. "Only, I know what Difficult Days are like. I quite often don't feel like talking about it on my Difficult Days either.

"But goodness," continued Piglet, "Difficult Days are so much easier when you know you've got someone there for you. And I'll always be here for you, Pooh.”

As Einstein once said “for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction” and love is no different the opposite of course being hate. We need to know and understand hate otherwise love would have no relevance and or no meaning.

If the Nazis in Germany had not shown hatred to the Jews how could anyone have shown them love? If the Manchester and London bombings had not happened how could those courageous people have shown love with no thought to their own safety to the many injured people. You don’t have to be a member of the emergency services or even superman, to perform this kind of Love.

So what is the opposite of agape love? If agape love is acting without thought of one’s self then the opposite has to be an act of hatred that is self centred, where we think only of ourselves and what we will gain from the situation. We can of course turn this around just by simply showing the other person love and like our story today the other person may learn how to love and be loved.

Agape love though does not have to be an act where we place ourselves in danger, it can be as simple as sitting beside someone when they feel down as in the Winnie the Pooh tale, or still loving someone when they have caused you pain or harm, even when you feel you are not in the wrong but they are. In simple terms agape love simply means giving much more than we receive or expect in return.

You never really know the true impact you have on those around you. You never know how much someone needed that smile you gave them. You never know how much your kindness turned someone’s entire life around. You never know how much someone needed that long hug or deep talk. So don’t wait for someone else to be kind first. Don’t wait for better circumstances or for someone to change. Just be kind, because you never know how much someone needs it.

Sometimes we can perform agape love and not realise it, just by spending time with someone who is feeling down, offering them a hug, or words of kindness. One example of this is, I was sat here in this very church when Anna our Minister spoke these words during a service one Sunday, that took me from a very dark place to one which I could see the light again, some of those words were:

You’ll come down from the Lurch

With an unpleasant bump..

And the chances are, then,

That you’ll be in a Slump.

And when you’re in a Slump,

You’re not in for much fun.

Un-slumping yourself

Is not easily done.

You will come to a place where the streets are not marked.

Some windows are lighted. But mostly they’re darked.

A place you could sprain both your elbow and chin!

Do you dare to stay out? Do you dare to go in?

How much can you lose? How much can you win?

Those very words came from Dr Seuss Oh the places you’ll go.

Of course the greatest story of Agape love was the one that I am sure most people will have heard of which comes from the bible, is that of Jesus Christ who gave his live that we may have eternal life. We can not know what internal struggle he may have had, as we are told that he knew from a young age what he had to do and he still went ahead with God’s plan.

So in some form whether it be in words spoken and time given or an act that requires a major sacrifice we can all perform agape love. So as we leave this place of worship today, I hope we can all leave with one resolve to perform one act of agape love in our daily lives this week.

As Dumbledore said in Harry Potter “Love and happiness can be found even in the darkest of places, if we only remember to turn on the light.”

**Prayer**

Spirit of life and love, may we learn to love without expecting love in return, may we learn to love when times are hard, may we learn to love in difficult situations and when we have learned to love, may we be able to teach others to love in this way.

Spirit of life and love, help us not to live with pride or arrogance, but to choose to walk with humility and grace. Help us to extend kindness instead of rudeness towards others. Help us to lay aside the critical tone and tearing down with our words, so that we can truly walk in peace. Help us not to live selfishly, looking only to our own interests. Help us not to become easily angered. Help us not to be so quickly reactive, but instead slow to speak and slow to become angry.

Amen.

**Benediction**

Spirit of life and love, as we go out into the world, may the love we have learned about this morning, the love we carry with us, and the love shown to others, be with us today and always.