

## LOVE, BETWEEN WILL AND GRACE

A Sermon by Fritz Hudson

October 19, 2008

Love Makes a Family. That's what the wonderful exhibit is called that surrounds us in our Fireplace Room this month. In particular I want to thank Pam Wakeman for her work in bringing it here. And I want to thank the Social Action Committee, the GLBT Welcoming Committee, Parents & Friends of Lesbians and Gays and other individual contributors for underwriting its expense. It's a photo exhibit, yes. And the photos are rich and telling. But, as you've noticed, it's much more than that. Each photo carries with it the story its subjects tell, in their own words, of their family's particular love. They remind me of the rich stories I'm privileged to hear each time I help a couple form their love into the words of their wedding – the first step, in many cases, in the formation of their family.

Two weeks ago I spoke of love as our doctrine. I traced how we teach love to grow: from its seed in what the Greeks named *eros* (love looking inward), through the flower they called *philia* (love turned outward), to the fruit they knew as *agape* (the love that transcends its own life). It is the journey of life as our faith understands it – as the chance to grow a soul. Today I want to go back to look more closely at just how that seed of love first comes into being and at the forces essential to its growth. I will name them Grace and Will.

To some of you, I'm sure, that sounds wrong from the get-go. "Grace and Will?" you're saying. Shouldn't that be "Will and Grace?" How many of you have ever seen that TV sit-com? How many would call yourselves regular watchers or fans? To me, before this week, the show was only a name. I'd never watched it. The price in commercial-watching for the laughs of TV almost seems too steep for me. But I knew that the show centered on a gay man and a straight woman who were best friends, sometimes roommates. And I knew it's been somewhat groundbreaking, for popular culture, in exploring and affirming gay life and love. I now know it ran for eight seasons on NBC, 1998-2006, through 184 episodes. Thanks to Chinese internet bootleg TV, I could even watch 10 or 12 of them this week. And I learned that Will and Grace are more than names in the show. They are also deep themes reverberating through the story arc – often touching the source and course of love as a seed for family. But, as you'll see, I think they got the order wrong. In love, Grace comes first, I want to say. And only by following Grace, with great care, can Will grow what Grace creates.

Conjure up with me please the experience, the feeling, of love. Plato, the Greek, in his *Symposium*, you recall, captures the longing for union that moves us toward love. His character Aristophanes images our human origin as a strong ball of a being with four arms and four legs extending all around, and a two-faced head commanding the entire horizon. To remove our threat to his power, Aristophanes says, Zeus had us split down the middle, forcing us to turn ourselves inward in search of our severed half to regain our integrity. And what do we feel when that union is achieved? The experience retains two sides: the experience of being loved and the experience of loving.

\* To be loved is to feel accepted, affirmed, appreciated even as we are, in the moment, without having earned it. And, at the same time, it is to be stimulated and supported to fulfill nascent strengths within us. It is to feel ourselves warmed into becoming a better self - a self, partially, we only vaguely felt possible, and, partially, a new self totally undreamed of.

\* From the other side, to love is to feel our self drawn into finding, exercising and inhabiting powers of other-centeredness. It is to feel sensitive to, understanding of, contributory to the powers of another – to find our own pleasure intertwined with another's fulfillment.

In one word, the experience of love is openness. May Sarton (poet, homosexual, Unitarian) names its raw beginning: "Love opens the doors to everything, as far as I can see, including and perhaps most of all, the door into one's own secret, and often terrible and frightening, real self." (*Mrs. Stevens Hears the Mermaids Singing*) But then Victor Frankl (psychologist, heterosexual, Jew) shows where it goes: Those who love are "enabled to see the essential traits and features in the beloved person; and even more, he sees what is potential in him, that which is not actualized but ought to be actualized. Furthermore, by his love, the loving person enables the beloved person to actualize these potentialities. By making him aware of what he can be and of what he should become, he makes these potentialities come true." (*Man's Search for Meaning*.)

Does that seem a little too heady for this fundamentally heartfelt experience? Come down then for a moment into June Jordan's picture, from her *Poem for My Love*.

*How do we come to be here  
next to each other in the night  
Where are the stars that show us  
to our love inevitable  
Outside the leaves flame usual in darkness and the rain  
falls cool and blessed on the holy flesh  
the black men waiting on the  
corner for  
a womanly mirage  
I am amazed by peace  
it is this possibility of you  
asleep  
and breathing the quiet air.*

The story of *And Tango Makes Three* says simply that every year girl and boy penguins start noticing each other and then "When the right girl and the right boy find each other, they become a couple." They make it sound so easy! I've been married now for 21 years, but that's just one more year than the 20 I first spent noticing before I found that "right girl" to marry. Unlike for penguins, perhaps, love between humans does not come just "naturally."

In his *Letters to a Young Poet*, Rainer Maria Rilke wrote, "For one human being to love another: that is perhaps the most difficult of all our tasks, the ultimate, the last test and proof, the work for which all other work is but preparation." (*Letters* 7. 14 May 1904).

To explain the difficulty, he says, "in other conflicts nature herself enjoins men to collect themselves, to take themselves firmly in the hand with all their strength, while in the heightening of love the impulse is to give oneself wholly away." In order to strengthen another's self, he is saying, we first must be a self ourselves. In Rilke's words, "Young people . . . cannot yet know love. . . . Love is at first not anything that means merging, giving over and uniting with another (for what would a union be of something unclarified and unfinished?) . . . But (love) is a high inducement to the individual to ripen, to become world, to become world for himself for another's sake. It is a great exacting claim upon him, something that chooses him out and calls him to vast things."

If my 10 or 12 viewings of Will and Grace on TV are at all representative, this is the story they lived. Nature in Will Truman and Grace Adler created attraction but it also created separation. Sexually, unlike most of their genders, these two were oriented NOT to merge. And this separation freed them. It freed them in important ways to spend important years, with each other's help, to form their selves - "to become world" as Rilke puts it. For love, to be lived, takes a lot of learning first. Franz Kafka, the Czech writer, said it slyly, in a way the sticks with me. In a conversation with a friend, Kafka said, "Love has as few problems as a motor car. The only problems are the driver, the passengers, and the road." (Gustav Janouch. *Conversations with Kafka*. New Directions Publishing, 1971. p.179). All three need some getting used to. And Will and Grace's story, as I've come to see it, is one long course of driver's education.

But I want you to know that I did more for this sermon than just watch TV, now. I read as well. And one thing I read brought an insight I really want to bring up for our attention. The writer is Sydney Harris, long-time syndicated columnist from my home town *Chicago Tribune*. His insight, for me, was at once obvious and surprising – the best kind. It's this: "One of the most common fallacies held by men and women is that each of us has an equal capacity for giving love to others. While we recognize that people have different physical and mental abilities, we balk at admitting that our emotional natures are likewise disparate. . . . Just as we have different levels of energy, so we have different voltages of emotion, so to speak, and a low-voltage battery is incapable of transmitting a high voltage charge."

Had you thought about this diversity before? I hadn't done so enough. Were you seduced into assuming the "common fallacy" of our "equal capacity" for love? I was, at least a little. So where does it lead us in our learning for love? Here's Harris' lesson:

"It may take nearly a lifetime for us to assess correctly the amount and quality of love that is in our power to discharge creatively, without all the common distortions that masquerade under that name. . . . "Much married people may blame their poor 'choices' or a mate, but it is more likely that they are looking for much more to get than they are able to give. A successful romance is possible, of course, only when both parties are able and willing to give more than they get."

Wow! That, for me, is a learning. If the state tested our possession of it before granting us marriage licenses, the roads of family life might be much, much less well-traveled, but also far safer. And if our adolescence came with mandatory "planned parenthood," I'm sure a much higher percentage of our babies would flourish in the warmth of such love. I saw Will Truman learn that lesson on TV. In an early episode I watched, he opined that love brought together a flower who needed attention, like Grace's mother, and a gardener who needed to give it. By the series' end, in his marriage with Vince and their parenting of little Ben, I think he'd found a better model. And Karen and Jack, Grace and Will's best friends, I think modeled people who over time learned the limits of their capacities for love – their low voltage, if you will. At the series' end they are well-settled into a healthy symbiosis which requires of each of them only the little more love they are capable of giving above what they're able to get.

Again to fix the learning, I'll give Harris' words a sharper point. Zora Naele Hurston, the 20<sup>th</sup> Century African American novelist, makes it. She wrote, "Love, I find is like singing. Everybody can do enough to satisfy themselves, though it may not impress the neighbors as being very much."

So now I'll come 'round finally to the naming of these givens in our lives for love.

\* We each reach adulthood with an orientation for the *eros* we are born with. We are heterosexual, homosexual, bi-sexual.

\* We each are also endowed with a limited range in our capacity for loving – a different voltage in our emotional make-up, somewhere along the line from high to low.

You might call these givens fate. Will Truman might well have, in fact. Several times in the series he spoke of his meeting and journey with Grace Adler as fate-driven, unchosen, undrivable. But to me this name casts those givens too darkly and unfairly hardens even their edges.

Many would call these givens "nature" or "natural". When Roy and Silo's story became national news in 2005, many used those words to support legitimating human same-sex marriage and parenting. In an episode that same year, Will and Jack found inspiration for their platonic friendship standing in front of the penguins at the zoo. But what is natural animalistically only gets you so far in finding what's right humanly. As one sympathetic scientist at the time pointed out, "infanticide is widespread in the animal kingdom." Where does that lead us?

Well here is where I'm led for today. The name I would give these givens of our life in love is Grace. I would name our erotic orientations and our diversified emotional capacities Grace for two reasons

- first, they come to us from places mysterious and prior to our command – whether by nature or by nurture. But

- second, they carry within them - along with great challenges - great gifts, great powers for growth and self-transcendence.

What else is needed to see these givens as divine?

The gifts of erotic orientation and of emotional energy, whatever its capacity, when seen as Grace, gives us then three charges.

First – to revere them, to give them all their due respect.

Second – to celebrate them, to enjoy them, to revel in their revelation to us.

But there's a third charge.

It is to use them well. It is to shape them as we can, however little or difficult that may be. In a word our third charge is to bring this Grace into partnership with our Will.

Hecato of Rhodes, the stoic philosopher who lived 1900 years ago, wrote, "I will show you a love potion without drug or herb or any witch's spell: If you wish to be loved, love." However differently oriented, however differently capacitated, each of us can still choose to love. And that choice, that act of will, will make a difference.

Ranier Maria Rilke also wrote his young poet, "The demands which the difficult work of love makes upon our development are more than life-size. (As) beginners we are not up to them. But if we nevertheless hold out. (If we) take this love upon (ourselves) as burden and apprenticeship. (If we keep from) losing ourselves in all the light and frivolous play, behind which people have hidden from the most earnest earnestness of their existence) — then (he said), then a little progress will perhaps be perceptible to those who come long after us. That would be much." (*Letters* 7. 14 May 1904)

Our small choices to love, will make, of all humanity, a family.