

Love Like a Fine Ether

Curtis Murphy

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N.B. These sermons are made available with a request: that the reader appreciate that, ideally, a sermon is an oral/aural experience that takes place in the context of worship, supported and reinforced by readings, contemplative music, rousing hymns, silence, and prayer and that it is but one part of an extended conversation that occurs over time between a minister and a covenanted congregation.

There is a story my mother has told me many times. She was living in London, Ontario when she was about 21 and in her last year of university. She was having a really difficult time – her mother had just died, she felt directionless and like she had no idea what she was doing in life, and to top it off, she had just broken up with her first love. She was feeling absolutely miserable, and what's more, it was her birthday, and nobody knew. This was in the days before a little reminder would pop up on your phone, so you could remember to wish people a happy birthday. She said, “It was pouring rain all day, and I was wandering around campus. I kept bumping into people I knew and they kept avoiding me and not wanting to talk.” She called her housemates to say that she was just going to stay out for the evening and hang out at the library, but they said no, no come home – we made dinner. So she said ok, and went home. When she arrived, she found that not only had they made dinner, but they had gathered friends and thrown her a surprise birthday party. They did know, and they did care. She was not alone, or forgotten, even when she thought she was.

I've always thought this was a beautiful and affirming story. But of course we don't all get a surprise birthday party at the end of a terrible day. Life does not always deliver Hollywood moments where everything is turned upside down and made right again. We get so busy, so preoccupied, so overwhelmed, that we keep forgetting to make that call, send that card or text or email, letting people know we are thinking of them. Perhaps this is a product of fast-paced postmodern life, or perhaps it's just human nature. We care so much more than we manage to show. A great deal of our struggles, our fear, loneliness and pain is lived out in silent anonymity. But so are much of our love, compassion, and tenderness.

At the Montreal School of Theology, where I studied for several years, students and faculty would gather for an informal worship service at lunchtime on Wednesdays during the school year. One of the central features of those services is what they call “prayers of the people,” fairly similar to what we call the sharing of joys and sorrows. In a small group, these are usually spoken aloud, with everyone invited to lift up a person or a situation for the community to hold in prayer. People often name loved ones who are sick or struggling with some of life's many challenges. Last year, in the first week of September, one of my professors said a prayer for all of the students gathering for classes at the university across the street, particularly the young first year students, and those who were far from home. He prayed that they would be safe and

cared for, that they would find connection and friendship, and that they would remember who they are, remember their own sense of worth amid an environment of hard work, high expectations, and often competition and intense pressure to always be better.

I was deeply touched by his prayer in that moment. I thought of my own first few years in Montreal as a young student in my early 20's, and remembered how lonely and confused and lost I felt at times. I found it beautiful to think of thousands of young people rushing to class, gulping down coffee to stay awake, feeling awkward and insecure – totally unaware that there was a small group of strangers sitting in a basement room across the street, saying prayers for their well-being. Whatever you may think about the power and meaning of prayer – call it the energy of compassion, the energy of lovingkindness – whatever you call it, we were filling the campus with it. Thinking about this brought to mind the possibility that, in my own difficult times, there were total strangers thinking of me and wishing me well, and made me wonder how often such things happen – how often people are holding us in love and care and appreciation, and we have no idea.

Ralph Waldo Emerson said:

“We have a great deal more kindness than is ever spoken.

The whole human family is bathed with an element of love like a fine ether.

How many persons we meet in houses, whom we scarcely speak to, whom yet we honour and who honour us!

How many we see in the street, or sit with in church, whom though silently, we warmly rejoice to be with.”

“How many people we meet in the street, or sit with in church, whom though silently, we warmly rejoice to be with.” Yes, it is true! I think of the communities I am part of – and think of how many people I warmly rejoice to be with, and never say so. How many people I warmly rejoice to see, and feel love, gratitude, and connection, even when I struggle to remember their names! All the people who have died, or moved to other cities, or who I have lost touch with, but still I think of them, and my heart warmly rejoices.

And I have no doubt this is true for all of you as well. For all of us. For everyone in this room today. You may think you're nothing special, not a particularly good or loving or generous person, but that's just the point – it's the ordinary love and compassion you express in a thousand forgettable moments that has such power. Think about it. Imagine how much love and care surrounds you that you don't even know of? How many people, at this very moment, are singing your praises, either aloud or in the silence of their hearts? How many times has someone lit a candle in gratitude for something you have said or done, or some kindness you have shown them? How often is it that people are laughing again as they retell a joke they first heard from you (no matter how corny it may have been!).

Almost certainly more often than you know. You are bathed in an element of love like a fine ether. Believe it. Know it. Feel it.

Think of those young students who prepared a surprise birthday party for my mother more than 45 years ago. In that case they *did* get to see the look of joy, surprise, and relief on my mother's face, to know that they had been a part of giving a gift. But they have no idea how that gift has continued to live on. None of them are people my mother kept in touch with long-term. Some of them have probably forgotten. It has probably never occurred to them to think of how many times my mother has retold that story, and how many more times she remembers it in her heart. They have no idea how she passed on that joy and gratitude to her family and friends again and again by recounting that moment. They certainly don't know that her son became a preacher and is even now telling that story to a roomful of people in a church in Toronto. Some of those people are probably asleep in their beds right now, or busy at work, stuck in traffic, sitting in church listening to a boring sermon, or a million other things, but they are *bathed in an element of love like a fine ether*, and they don't even know it. They would be amazed at the power of their love, if they only knew. And you too, would be amazed at the power of your love, if you only knew. Take a moment to be in awe of yourself, of your own capacity for compassion and generosity, and the countless ordinary ways it manifests in the world, so gently and naturally that you are hardly aware of it. Take a moment to know that and feel that. That is the truth. Amen.