I want to take the time to personally thank this congregation and Lynn and Shawn for inviting me to speak at the service today. I am incredibly honoured.

Just a bit about myself. I have been attending First mainly online since the spring of 2021. I’ve been one of the faceless zoom accounts in the background during Sunday service.

This month’s theme is love and we have just finished celebrating Valentine’s Day.

I want to talk about love and the complicated feelings I have about it. You might say I have a love-hate relationship with the word love.

Love can mean so much. Love is a huge word for Unitarians, it is our doctrine. The word love invokes the transcendent and the divine. No matter what subject matter we explore as Unitarians, the road always seems to lead back to love, and that is a very good thing.

But my mind from time to time often goes back to the Beatles slogan, “all you need is love” and in the face of so many fears and challenges in life and in the world, the sentiment can sometimes feel loaded or feel like it falls short of what it hopes to represent.

Love is invoked in many ways.

It is sometimes called upon in advertising and pop culture. My mind imagines a piece of Homesense decor with the slogan “live, laugh, love” or a restaurant chain’s new menu option for meat lover’s or seafood lover’s and so on. There’s nothing wrong with loving the food you enjoy or wanting to decorate your home with words of positivity and gratitude. But I think the proliferation of that word in the human culture can sometimes make love feel like a taken-for-granted ideal rather than a real living symbol of the sacred and life changing event that an encounter with that word can be.

Love is also invoked in ways that can put pressure on a person.

Because love naturally calls to mind the highest aspirations of life, love can also be a bomb dropped on another person. There’s the obvious misuse in saying “if you loved me you would...” But in other ways love can become an unhealthy standard that subtly hangs over the heads of many people of good will.

In my time and specific context as a Roman Catholic, love was often a loaded subject. Of course we heard the numerous passages of loving our enemies and loving one another as we are loved, but love was also a very specific tool used to
For example, there was the passage and the call to Love God with all our soul and with all our strength. For people who are theistically minded, this call is an understandably virtuous sentiment. But the way it was inculturated in the community was not always the most healthy. Love became a matter of will power, a matter of determination, and a moral code by which everything was externally evaluated.

In the realm of the human heart, love naturally and rightly so, opens the door to infinite possibility. We can always love more, we can always theoretically BE more loving and DO more for the sake of love. This infinity of potential is a gift and a sign of our freedom as sentient spiritual beings.

However, what ended up happening was that in my community and around those who had leadership in the church, sometimes the message that came off was that we were never loving enough. There was always harder to go, more to do, and more need that was yet unmet. The end result sometimes was burnout, self doubt and frequent self criticism, and even trauma. Ultimately, in our tireless pursuit of love, we ended up departing from the very centre of love.

As a Unitarian, as a theological liberal, and as a liver and survivor of life, I believe that love is at the very centre of life. It informs every aspect and dimension of our being and doing, and it makes life so precious and so wonderful and I thank Life for giving me the ability and capacity to love.

And yet, I must remember that whenever I think I understand love as it truly is, Love always finds a way of being even bigger than I previously thought. My experiences of Love have paradoxically liberated me from my previous beliefs about love. And it usually catches me off guard and in my blindspots.

There are many incredible thinkers, spiritual writers, activists, and leaders who have all sorts of opinions and ideas about what loving well looks like. But sometimes, even these folks can express sentiments about love that may be liberating for some, but limiting and burdensome for others. While one aspect of Love is its all encompassing and universal nature, another dimension of love is also its ability to hold infinite space for the highly unique and particular needs of each person to live by their own terms.

When one voice, image, or perspective on love becomes THE perspective on love, or becomes the dominant image or expression of love, we paradoxically fall off base from the centre of love. When one group or movement within the human community expresses a particular aspect or dimension of love, you can absolutely expect that two or three other sections of the human community will pop up and show to us like a mirror, the other dimensions of love that we may be neglecting or not adequately
In today’s reading by James Allison, James talks about the nature of being liked. I find it so interesting that he wrote about being liked and not loved. In some ways, being liked rings in a much different way than being loved does, though both are of course incredible gifts.

In the chapter, Confessions of a Former Marginaholic, James says... that he was afraid to relax into himself because he thought that if he did, his drive and desire to care for others would be diminished. The interesting thing about James was that he had always pushed himself to go to the margins. He had joined the Dominicans and worked in South America caring for AIDS patients. Nevertheless, despite this heroic giving of self he made for the sake of love, James struggled to be fully present to the people in his care. Eventually, James came to believe that it was because of his struggle as a gay man to like himself, to see himself as likeable, and to be able to be liked by others, that he was not able to fully connect. Beneath the pressure and business of his rush to the margins, James was struggling to step into the parts of himself that were not yet accepted into his loving centre, namely himself.

The question of our finiteness is deeply connected to the question of love. I believe fundamentally that human nature is inclined towards life giving love. But our finiteness, our tendency to get caught up in an idea about ourself is a fundamental challenge that can make true love, both of others and of self, seem risky or even dangerous.

Many of us here today have an inheritance of the Western perspective on life. For some, that perspective may have come in the form of the Protestant work ethic, a hard nosed determination to sacrifice one’s self for duty, family, country and community. For others, the Western way has appeared as the skeptical tradition, where the impulses of a movement or ideal seem naive, wishful thinking, or too good to be true. There may be many of us who feel that hard work, happiness, and hope for the future are all attempts to avoid the harsh reality of a suffering world. Love can seem like something that is real in some ways, but is beaten out by the cold hard rock of material existence.

I think James struggled with all of these perspectives, and respected each one of them in their own space. But what James eventually had to realise in order to come to terms with the confrontations of his life, was that love is not a product of willpower, it’s a place we arrive at. Love cannot be conjured into being, for it already exists and surrounds us. I believe that love, which is defined by palaeontologist and theologian Teilhard De Chardin as the affinity of one for an other, upholds the entire structure of encapsulating. In this way, the entire human family is a self-regulating organism and love continues to incorporate and encompass those that inevitably get pushed out of the edges of one community’s sphere of kinship.
And just as one atom has affinity for another atom, and just as one lover has affinity for another person, we also have affinity towards ourselves. We are ourselves and we cannot do any more than just be ourselves.

It was when James was finally able to relax into himself, to like himself, that he could then be of real help to others, but this time the game had changed.

James mentions that once he got out of the trap of being a marginaholic, which was thinking that he himself needed be discontented and marginalised in order to be attentive to those on the margins, James found that he was finally able to be curious and unthreatening… and creative and playful in his work, in his care. He found new energy, he found authentic calling, and he found that sweet spot where his longing matched with the need of the world.

I am a big fan of feminist and Nietzschean psychotherapy, that is my particular individual focus for my therapy craft. What I like about both feminism and the Nietzschean way is that they often have radical self expression at their core. Both schools of thought see the inner person as having great value and potential when unburdened by the social expectations and spiritual and intellectual prisons of others’ creations.

In this existential approach to therapy, and I myself received this therapy in different ways, there is a realisation in each person that their inner desires and impulses are not inherently wrong or selfish or dirty, but in fact good sources of life that help us come into a fuller joy of being.

The desire within us, which can get tangled up with the expectations and assumptions we carry, with our own trauma and woundedness, and with the unfolding fog of life’s mystery, is in fact good.

That which you deeply yearn for is good and is ordered toward love and the fullness and core of life. And we also have within us a fire to make that desire a reality.

That fire, that vitality, which is an act of love of self, is not a bad thing when held in the full breadth of our human loving response to the other. Do not be afraid of that fire, of that will to power.

James Alison believed that once he liked himself, he could be playful and creative. Being at play is something we yearn for from the beginning of childhood. It is an expression of our love in the material world we inhabit. That play, that exercise of self, that is what we need to propel us in our work and craft. That's where the effort goes. It’s what satisfies us in our life trajectory, and when it is not satisfied, it lets us
know through boredom, depression, and discontent so that we can know to keep moving on until we find something that feeds us. But sometimes, an unhealthy vision of love can lead us to sublimate that desire, that self-willing, and label it as unhealthy egoism or selfishness.

When we see the need of the world, there is a desire in us to respond. And that is a good thing. That is what it means to love. That is the very impulse that leads us to communion and what has brought us here today in this elementary school auditorium. And it is good that we are here. And it is good that we then go out of here and do something else.

So, in that loving communion with the world, let us go out and centre ourselves in love, and maybe we can also like ourselves too while we’re at it.

May it be so.