

WHAT THE WORLD NEEDS NOW

Friar Bob Hutmacher, ofm

*How do I love thee? Let me count the ways.
I love thee to the depth and breadth and height
My soul can reach, when feeling out of sight
For the gifts of being and ideal grace,
I love thee to the level of every day's
Most quiet need, by sun and candle-light.
I love thee freely, as men strive for right.
I love thee purely, as they turn from praise.
I love thee with the passion put to use
In my old griefs, and with my childhood's faith.
I love thee with a love I seemed to lose
With my lost saints. I love thee with the breath,
Smiles, tears, of all my life; and, if God choose,
I shall but love thee better after death.*

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Elizabeth Barrett Browning, 1806 - 1861
(Sonnet 43)

February is the month of love [well, maybe half of it]. St. Valentine was a Roman martyr of the 3rd century; in 496 Pope Gelasius placed his feast in the Roman calendar of saints on February 14; it remained on the calendar until 1969. Even though he's not celebrated at Mass, Valentine is certainly remembered. There are myriad legends about this man you can find in Catholic sources but I suspect Valentine will remain associated with love on the 14th of February in both religious and secular realms for ages to come. Can you imagine Hallmark and florists, restaurants and lovers relinquishing Valentine's Day?

I can't tell you why or how long I've liked the poetry of Elizabeth Barrett Browning. I just do. *How Do I Love Thee?* is full of images that echo phases of human life and even Scripture. The poet conjures up the kind of heartbroken love found only in the grief of death. Many widows and widowers express the fact that their married love does not end with death. Our beliefs in the Communion of Saints or Poor Souls come from that love emanating from the heart of God which survives life itself. *May you, rooted and grounded in love, have the strength to comprehend with all the holy ones what is the breadth and length and height and*

depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. [Ephesians 3:18] That quote echoes Browning's line of *I love thee to the depth and breadth and height my soul can reach...* That makes me think of my parents who were one month short of their 66th wedding anniversary when Dad died. How do humans love with such passion and devotion, shown when they can speak with their eyes? What gives one the power to love her spouse beyond incredible disfigurement or horrid diseases or dementia and remain faithful? I say it's the love of God.

An observation I've made for some years: have you ever noticed how much energy it takes to hold a grudge, to despise another person or even let those ill feelings fester and grow into outright hatred? I am fascinated by how humans sometimes choose to be miserable, choose to hold a grudge or let something escalate into outright hatred. I do not understand that dynamic. God didn't create us to be miserable – we choose to build that kind of cave for ourselves! I also know that when a person gets wrapped up in a cocoon of hatred, resentment or any kind of negativity, that person misses most of the goodness of life all around him or her.

Just remember a period in your life when that may have happened, especially within your own family. When we hate, we're constantly on the lookout for the enemy. For example, people are wary that "he" or "she" might show up at a family party; because you're on guard you lose the fun of the party, can't let your defenses down and must keep the other person at bay because "I'll be dipped if I'm going to change my mind or ask forgiveness." But how often do we grovel before God, asking to be forgiven? I'm not shocked in the confessional but still amazed at what some people choose to live with in life.

Once I was preaching in another city and a man came up to me after that Mass and asked to talk. It turned out that he'd had a fight with one of his brothers years before, as in thirty years before, and they still maintained a fence between themselves. His brother was dying and the poor guy didn't know how to

approach him and make peace. "What, me eat crow after thirty years?" I told him he had a choice. "What do you mean?" he asked. "Well, either you get yourself over there and talk with your brother so you can both live and die in peace, or finish your earthly relationship unresolved with subsequent memories of what could have been." He left, they talked, they reconciled. Those are the blessed moments in our lives when the *love of Christ fills us with the fullness of God*.



"And I say to you, I have also decided to stick with love, for I know that love is ultimately the only answer to mankind's problems. And I'm going to talk about it everywhere I go. I know it isn't popular to talk about it in some circles today. And I'm not talking about emotional bosh when I talk about love; I'm talking about a strong, demanding love. And I have seen too much hate. I've seen too much hate on the faces of sheriffs in the



South. I've seen hate on the faces of too many Klansmen and too many White Citizens Councilors in the South to

*myself, because every time I see it, I know that it does something to their faces and their personalities, and I say to myself that **hate is too great a burden to bear**. I have decided to love. If you are seeking the highest good, I think you can find it through love."* ["Where Do We Go From Here" speech, Dr. Martin L. King, Jr., August 16, 1967]

Why this talk of love? It's not for Valentine's Day, believe me. First, let's make some distinctions with the word love. C.S. Lewis' 1960 book *The Four Loves* can help us. **Affection** is caring for someone through the fondness of familiarity. **Friendship** is the bond between people who share values, interests and activities. **Eros** is the romantic love of being in love or loving another person that can also be misconstrued in a very selfish sexual desire.

Agape is the love that exists regardless of changing circumstances. Lewis recognized **agape** to be specifically the Christian virtue to achieve. The other three "natural loves" are subservient to **agape** because this love is the very essence of God. This is the love that Dr. King preached.

Remember Burt Bacharach's great song *What The World Needs Now Is Love*? The world specifically needs **agape**, the very heart or essence of God, who is love. It's too easy to say that, continue reading the headlines about recent murders, political maneuverings, terror attacks, racial strife, job discrimination, life issues and then do nothing. Routinely doing life will not change our world. We must make a move, even if only one word.

You might say: "but **I'm** just a little person. How can **I** possibly make any kind of difference on the world stage?" Well, consider an ant colony. The largest known ant supercolony was on the Ishikari coast of Hokkaidō, Japan. The colony was estimated to contain 306 million worker ants and one million queen ants living in 45,000 nests interconnected by underground passages over an area of 2.7 km² (670 acres). Remember that my little **I**-ness is just one of **seven and a half billion inhabitants of Mother Earth**. Overwhelming when told to *love one another as I have loved you*, isn't it? But every single queen and worker ant is important to the life and organization of that supercolony. Even more so, each human being is important in sustaining our life on this planet. We do nothing in isolation, even when we think no one is around or within earshot.

In the January Legionnaire I referred to the present climate of our country. January was memorable, wasn't it? The incoming administration doubts the entire surveillance community and continues to flirt with foreign powers. Congressional hearings are often like slaughter houses of humiliation, yet other leaders seem to be far from ideal servants of the common good. The people we voted into office to serve are turning against each other in unprecedented ways. I don't remember any campaign and period of transition of power to have been so divisive or antagonistic. Unrest

in ethnic communities is boiling just under the surface of our society. Massive demonstrations are everywhere in the U.S. today (Jan. 21), one of which is right here around our block. 175,000 people! Can I ever make a difference in the face of all this? Little ole me? Yes!

Love. **Agape.** Give one person the essence of God with a single positive word and you may accomplish more than an increase in military spending. Put a Muslim person on the bus at ease and you will have brought Christ along on the CTA. Change the direction of a horribly negative conversation to one about your family –and you’ve brought life. If you reach an item on the top shelf at the grocery store for an elderly person, you have expressed the Divine with no words or politics or attitudes. Like Jesus we can simply and humbly enter the world, bring the Holy into daily life and truly make a difference. And if you consider those gestures or words insignificant, think how a rejected leper must have felt when Jesus didn’t hesitate to acknowledge and heal him. If a few were to touch a leper, that would make her or him unclean and the Mosaic law required the one who touched the leper to undergo a complex ritual purification. Jesus obviously wasn’t concerned about that legal proscription; he only saw a person in need and healed him. That is the way of love as taught by Jesus and Francis.

To understand more fully the effect one individual can have on another human, think about one teacher who praised you for something. A few words of affirmation can transform one’s self image. Each of us has the potential to change the ugly racial divisions in our country right now. Like Jesus – if you see a need for healing, simply make a move. It doesn’t take a fortune, only a smile and some caring. “It is in giving that we receive.” Gee, who said that?

As Catholic Christians, we are called by Christ himself to be active lovers. The sociological, economical and spiritual climate of our country demands actions that reflect the very presence of God. Dr. King was right when he said *hate is too great a burden to bear*. Life is tough enough these days; what’s the benefit of hating people who flee death squads for a

new life? Should we not be proud that we live in a country that came into being as a harbor for religious freedom and now be willing to share it with all who long for peace? Mary and Joseph were refugees who fled to Egypt, and even when back in Israel they had to flee to the safety of Nazareth in Galilee. God chose most difficult circumstances to enter human life: pregnancy before marriage and political asylum. The humble Christ embraced the life of a laborer. It was hatred that brought Jesus to the Cross and the world still has not learned that hate is only destructive. **Hatred is too great a burden to bear** for those who believe.

Here’s love in action: Bishop Frank DeWane, head of the USCCB Committee on Domestic Justice, wrote a letter from all U.S. bishops on January 18, 2017 to every member of Congress, asking them to postpone the repeal of A.C.A. until they have a replacement plan in place. The leaders of the Conference of Major Superiors of Men and Leadership Conference of Women Religious also wrote a letter to ask our new leaders for “respectful and dignified civil discourse with those whose positions differ from our own...”

28,000 police and soldiers were in Washington for the inauguration. What kind of world have we created for ourselves that we need that kind of self-policing? I am not naïve but honestly, *what the world needs now is love, sweet love*. It doesn’t take a graduate degree to love, nor an army to melt a stony heart. Jesus refused any entrapments of royalty or military might...and I do believe Jesus did just fine. Today it’s estimated that 2.18 **billion** Christians inhabit planet Earth. Amor vincit omnia; love conquers all. And it will continue to do so with God’s grace, forgiveness and our compassion. There are millions of disgruntled people around us but you and I **MUST** make a conscientious decision to be positive, to respect others, accept differences, genuinely care about people, bravely stand up for justice, be proud of our faith heritage and live honorably with Christ as the center of our existence. May God give you and our world peace. And thank you for loving St. Peter’s and our Franciscan ministry! We love you and pray for you every day of the year. **Fr. Bob Hutmacher, ofm**