

# Why it Matters Who and What We Love

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One of the problems with publicising a sermon topic a month before writing it is life does not stand still until you compose it. My published title, “Why what and whom we love is important,” was challenged almost immediately by my remembering John Lennon’s observation, “It matters not who you love, where you love, why you love, when you love or how you love, it matters only that you love.” He’s right...mostly and I’m wrong...mostly. What he doesn’t mention is we can love badly. But I get ahead of myself.

It has been a month of loving badly. Only Friday I listened to a Radio NZ interviewer having to embarrass a spokesperson from Housing New Zealand into putting a mother and her children into a motel because the mould in their state house is so bad her 7-year-old son now has a damaged heart. He can’t run on the playground lest he have a heart attack. Any rational person with a stone-cold heart would have acted earlier just to avoid the possibility of being publicly shamed. Any loving person would have acted long ago.

Friday was also my tenth anniversary of moving to New Zealand. I had several reasons just that day to give thanks that I no longer lived in the US, but here is just one. President Jimmy Carter announced with his usual self-effacing grace and dignity that his cancer had spread to his brain. In response on Fox News there was a celebration. Comments like these were not the exception, but the rule: “That’s Karma Jimmy, it will get you. You said Homosexuality was OK and you claim to be a Christian? And a Baptist preacher? And now you have cancer? Karma Buddy.” Another said “Brain cancer explains some of his lib[eral] policies.” A third replied that “The worse [sic] president we ever had, oh wait Obama. How many died because of this man. Bye bye Jimmy.”

We are no longer surprised when the dark side of humanity is exposed on the Internet. President Carter is a man who only hopes to outlive the last guinea worm, a debilitating parasite in water that afflicted over three million people in developing countries three decades ago before he began his fight to eradicate it. There have been only 17 cases so far this year. The comments about him on Fox reveal a world badly in need of a love infusion.

We, with our banner proclaiming we are “standing on the side of love,” should have a pretty good idea about what love is and is not. But a review can’t hurt.

Love on the face of it is not something we choose. It is something that happens to us. We often hear the statement, “It was love at first sight.” Or, “I was swept off my feet.” Describing a book, “I was hooked after one page.” Or in churches, “One service and I knew I was at home.”

At its outset, all love has a passive element. It is true of love of friends or work or sports or nature or learning. Love is a response to the charm, the beauty, the worth or the potential worth of something outside our selves. To see and feel that charm we have to be open to it. We can only receive it if our attention is captured by it. We don’t act in order to love; rather, when we are acted upon, we love in response.

I don’t want to suggest all love begins by hitting us like a ton of bricks. Often it sneaks up on us. When The Beatles first came on the scene and my mates all rushed out to buy a suit with no lapels like theirs, I thought they’d had a hard days night and needed help. It really wasn’t until *Sgt Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band* was released that I became interested. It took *The White Album* to capture my love. Now, more than fifty years after they first took the world by storm, I have every song they ever recorded in my music collection and books about them in my library. I click on any article about them I see on the Internet. Oh yeah, yeah,

yeah, I'm in love, even though my suits still have lapels.

Much of what we love begins this way. Early on there may have to be a slow, even an unwilling acquaintance with the rudiments and a bit-by-bit reception of basic knowledge, before one is finally grasped by a vision of the complex and subtle relationships and meaning we call love.

When William Ellery Channing spoke of the glory of the soul, he was talking about the human capacity to discern what realities — among all the things that appeal to us — are truly worthy of our attention and worthy of our devoted service.

Once we have been grasped by our beloved, that is the end of the passive phase. Love is demanding. It demands a response—to be loyal and freely active on its behalf. Love asks us to spend our labour, talents, brainpower; money... and we do. Not for nothing do we say, “Love makes the world go 'round,” or “Love conquers all,” or “Love casts out fear,” or “Love is stronger than death.” All these sayings report the truth that when love is strong nothing can separate us from it — not flaws in or problems with our beloved, not the dangers of service in behalf of what we love, not the rewards of competing attractions, not even the death of those we love.

What else can we say about love?

Human beings and, from what I see in Facebook videos, most sentient creatures are made to be loved and to love. It's in our nature. We may be individuals, with our own ego needs, but we are also social animals. From the time we are born we cannot survive without love. Literally and metaphorically, it is our mother's milk. So yes, John Lennon, love matters. It is a matter of life or death.

Although love is always a requirement of our nature — a first requirement — love is never enough by itself. Perhaps family life is the most obvious example. We may love our family, but do one another terrible damage in our families, usually out of ignorance. We may love and want to work for international peace, but what good is it if we don't really know much of anything about other nations and cultures? Loving well and effectively requires the use of our minds. Love may happen to us when we are passively receptive, but wanting the well-being and future good — of any thing or anybody genuinely worthy of our affection — requires us to think, consult with others, study and learn what would be best for us to do. It is enormously important that love and intellect be joined in a patient and life-long search for wisdom, for the ability to love and do well.

Now we get to my earlier point, without using our intellect in a free and responsible way, we human beings can love the wrong things, things bad for us, things that won't sustain us or those we care about, things not worthy of the time and talent and brainpower and labour and money we spend on them. The big wrong things are obvious — from a distance. We wonder in amazement what bizarre, twisted wrong love could have led Work and Income to successfully prosecute and jail a young mother for benefit fraud. Why? Because she paid rent to a former partner who was abusive to live in a house he owned but did not live in. Work and Income argued she was in a de facto marriage relationship with him and so did not qualify for the paltry amount she got from her benefit for her and her children to survive on. Work and Income spends millions to find such cases and when proven wrong fails to rectify it unless the victim hires a lawyer to press their case. Her case is before the High Court now thanks to a lawyer working pro bono. How many welfare recipients can afford lawyers? How many more millions in revenue does the government lose by not going after high-wealth individuals and corporations who cheat on their taxes but are rarely prosecuted and never jailed?

Closer to home and everyday, the folly of love for the wrong things is often much less obvious, and easier to see in others than in ourselves. There are those who seem to love the hot thrills of a hurtful argument about truth more than they love truth. Some – probably all of us on occasion – love to nit pick and complain and criticize more than to rejoice in any good thing at all. Are there not some of us who love new cars, the latest technology; expensive vacations more than the health of our community we might generously support through charitable giving but don't? All of us are susceptible to loving the wrong things more than we ought. So, it is enormously important that we be ever willing to consider again the worthiness of our own loves, that our love of integrity might lead us to cultivate a tender conscience. So yes, John Lennon, that we love matters, but who and what we love is every bit as important as well.

And its importance goes well beyond our individual wellbeing. As we are social animals, love is essential to the common good. Reflecting on the importance of love and how we respond to it led me to question how love can be lifted out of a sonnet or a song or our hearts in a way that might transform the world in a meaningful way. My research led me to the work of philosopher Martha Nussbaum, best known for her “capabilities” approach to human development. This approach argues that a decent society guarantees all people the freedoms and opportunities they need to enjoy rich, rewarding, and fully realised lives. These include, at minimum, freedom from hunger, poverty and chronic joblessness; sufficient resources to access basic nutrition, healthcare, and education; and opportunities to relate to others and engage in deliberative processes that give all a meaningful say in determining the quality of their communities. In essence, this “capabilities” approach is one powerful way to define the foundations of human wellbeing. It envisions a society where privileged elites are subordinated to a democratic ethos in which everyone willingly makes sacrifices to promote the common good of all.

Wanting to learn more I downloaded her book *Political Emotions: Why love matters for justice* that explores the practicalities of achieving and sustaining that sort of society. That is, what are the means by which the vast majority of our fellow citizens can be persuaded to commit their time, their resources, and their passions to making such a capabilities-rich society a reality? In trying to help us understand what it might take to get many millions of people to participate in the achievement of such a state, Nussbaum argues painstakingly and cautiously for the indispensable role of activating people's most powerful and positive emotions, especially compassion and love. She contends that love, in particular, grants people the imaginative and motivating engagement with others that helps to make sacrifice and social activism possible. Our UU Seven Principles, especially respecting the dignity of every person, while necessary, are in the end too weak to stir the human heart. Only love can sustain the creation of a community in which all are valued and no member is regarded as any less complete or human than any other.

The problem then remains: what does it look like to animate such emotions as compassion and love for the common good? What practices, rituals, celebrations, and traditions can be exploited to gain the emotional support of a nation?

One approach that Nussbaum explores involves public ceremonies and public speeches that articulate a vision of the sort of inclusive, cooperative, and altruistic nation that must eventually be achieved in order to establish the conditions for realising human wellbeing. As an example she points to the speeches of Dr Martin Luther King, Jr. In them he invoked love again and again. His call for a beloved community that was all-inclusive, unconditionally respectful, and deeply humble about the limits of human knowledge and understanding, and yet constantly in quest of greater understanding and deepened wisdom, were all reminders of the kind of society he and his followers sought to create.

The enthusiasm, the passion, and, yes, the love that animated such a vision are what gave his

calls for change such staying power and why they still resonate with so many of us today. They help us to imagine the role we might play in making such a vision a reality.

In addition to giving public voice to that vision, Nussbaum sees as essential maintaining an openness to many forms of love – love for children, for friends, for romantic partners, for sports teams, even for democratic principles – as a strategy for recruiting new enthusiasts for a more inclusive and self-sacrificing community. Such a community rejects the idea that it is ever necessary for any person to suffer the indignities of hunger, poverty, homelessness, racism, sexism, or poor education. As with all of these forms of love, as well as many others, positive interactions are reinforced and feelings are unleashed that, in Nussbaum’s view, ultimately lead to increased levels of cooperation, altruism, and caring within the larger society.

The loves that prompt healthy interactions are likely to have a number of features in common that include: “a concern for the beloved as an end rather than a mere instrument; respect for the human dignity of the beloved; a willingness to limit one’s own greedy desires in favour of the beloved”<sup>1</sup>. All of these loves are exactly the kind of loves that need to be extended to all members of the community, which, again, is what can make love such a powerful basis for building a more sustainable and just society.

I like her vision and think it has merit, but I’m left wondering what do we do in Aotearoa New Zealand to create the vision where no Dr King is on the horizon? When we seem to have few politicians willing or, perhaps, able to articulate such a vision? Where those with less benign intentions use the media, their parliamentary advantage, the economic levers of power and their privilege to subvert democracy and social justice, that is, the common good?

As I noted earlier, we are reminded regularly that love conquers all. It is stronger than death itself. When we stand on the side of love we need not be intimidated or silenced. It gives us a power that cannot be crushed. If we have no Dr King, we must channel him in our families, with our friends, in our sports clubs, at work, in our schools, in our unions, at corporate board meetings and, of course here. We may be few in numbers but we are not inconsequential. Our families, friends and associates are many. In New Zealand, with its two degrees of separation, it means, like a virus, the love we stand for here can seriously infect the nation. We only need to submit to love’s demand that we spend our time and talent and brainpower and labour and money for the common good. Then, that we love will matter.

i Nussbaum, Martha C. *Political Emotions: Why love matters for justice*. London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2013. Page 382.