



## **Mason Jennings' "I Love You And Buddha Too" Where Is the Love?**

From the message series *Songs of the Spirit*  
Rev. Ken Beldon

Delivered at WellSprings Congregation, Chester Springs, PA  
May 5, 2013  
*Edited Transcript*

In my wayward youth (which in this case was about a decade ago because I had an extended adolescence), many of my nights out would end late in the evening at a convenience store looking for a sandwich. One night I was out with a buddy, and we wound up around 4:00 in the morning searching for our fourth meal – or our fifth meal, whatever it was.

The pickings were slim among the sandwiches that were left. I found a sandwich, and it was a *sad* sandwich. This limp lettuce that just hung there – I felt bad for it. Forlorn pickle. A rumor of ketchup that had once soaked into the bread. Bread that gave up hope long ago.

Well, I ate the sandwich anyway, but before I did I shouted out, "Where's the love? Where's the love in this sandwich? There's no love!"

I could be funny back then, but I could also be a total ass. But the point today is that question, "Where's the love?" That's what's most key.

That's what today's song is about: finding the love, cultivating the love. This song is a Universalist declaration of love as a uniting, unitive, unifying force. It echoes a treasured passage in one of Henry David Thoreau's writings, one of our leading lights from our spiritual ancestry. Thoreau was known in his time as one of the first Westerners to engage the writings of the Buddha and Buddhism. He wrote this:

*I know that some will have hard thoughts of me when they hear their Christ named beside my Buddha. Yet I am sure that I am willing that they should love their Christ more than my Buddha, for the love is the main thing, and I like Jesus as well.*

The main thing he's saying: It's the devotion we bring to our lives, not the dogma or the object of that religious devotion, that matters the most. The devotion, not the dogma, matters.

The song says:

*You are unnamable, you are unknowable.  
All we have is metaphor, that's what time and space are for.*

There is so much we do not know, cannot know, about the nature of life itself. How we approach that unknowing makes all the difference in our spiritual lives. Do we do it with an insistence that other people must believe as we do. Or do we turn more deeply into our own hearts and to wanting to know the hearts of others so that we can touch the reality of life that Thoreau said, where it is the love that is the main thing?

This is important right now, especially in the wake of the Boston bombings. There are some who absolutely insist that if only people would start believing the one true faith – whatever that one true faith

should be – if only people would believe this and stop believing all those others, all our problems would be done.

And then, of course, there are all these folks over here who wanna say *any* form of spiritual religious belief is the problem. As long as no one believes anything spiritually, then our problems will be solved.

Well, it's one of our core values here at WellSprings that there is an authentic choice beyond (not between but beyond) secularism and fundamentalism. WellSprings is a particular choice for people who wish to grow spiritually, who reject both of those false extremes.

Writing this past week was one of my favorite bloggers, Andrew Sullivan. He was reflecting on a quote by a Muslim theologian in response to those who wanted to lump all Muslim believers together, particularly associated with those who in the name of Islam commit violence. Andrew Sullivan agreed with what this theologian was saying and said these words: "The struggle of our time is not between religions so much as the struggle is within religions. The battle is between fundamentalist certainty on one hand and religious humility on the other."

That's what we hear in this song. That's what we hear in Thoreau's writing.

And by the way, it's about so much more than just "respect for theological diversity." We Unitarian Universalists love to talk about that "respect for theological diversity" like we're all just a bunch of disembodied course catalogs walking around, wanting to understand. No, that's not what this song is about, and it's not what Thoreau was saying. It's more than just respect for theological diversity. This is about practicing a kind of reconciling love. When I say reconciling, I'm talking about reconciliation, which can help to heal the hurts, the harms that exist within us and between us.

That is when love is the main thing, that kind of reconciling love. Notice in what I read to you before from Thoreau's writings. He said, "There are some that will have hard thoughts of me, conflict, hatred, resistance," and notice how he does not return serve. He could. He could absolutely volley it right back saying, "You're wrong!" or return hard thoughts to them... but notice as he makes love the main thing. Notice the generosity of spirit that he expresses, that he doesn't return serve with his own hard thoughts or hard hearts. He extends an olive branch of saying, "Let your love be even more abundant than my love because it is love that is the main thing, and that is what can unite us together."

It's one of the core beliefs at WellSprings that there are many streams, many streams, which flow to the same ocean and many paths paved with grace and wisdom upon which to explore our faith, the same ocean. There is but one common human destiny and many paths – grace and wisdom – upon which to explore that.

However, not all paths are paved with grace and wisdom. It's one of the things that most drives me up the wall about what Unitarian Universalism has become, and I've heard it many times in my life. "Oh, I'm Unitarian Universalist 'cause we can believe anything." No. We can believe many things if love is the main thing. But you know what? You cannot be a Unitarian Universalist and believe gay people are going to hell. You cannot be a Unitarian Universalist and believe that any tradition – right-wing, left-wing – has the answers because its book of scripture long ago settled the matter. That is not a Unitarian Universalist teaching, because there are some religious and spiritual paths that lead to awful, vile outcomes.

Some interpretations of spiritual life lead people to plant bombs by finish lines. Some include the idea that we must wipe other people and their being off the map. Some think the interpretation of their faith means making other people permanent second-class citizens under the law.

Where's the love in these paths? I don't hear it, and I don't experience it. I get a lot of afflictive emotions, a lot of anger, a lot of fear, a lot of incitement to violence: physical violence, emotional violence, spiritual violence. Where's the love? It's not there in those teachings.

By making love the main thing, our transformation is possible, bigger than any denomination, bigger than any tradition. It invites us to really dig into the truth that Alice Walker said. It's a great teaching, and it

should make us quake a little bit. It makes me quake a little bit. She said, “Love makes me look at what I can’t stand.” We want to numb out. We want to close down. We want to shut off. When we want to say we have an idea of another person’s reality, we have an idea of our own, and that’s the whole picture.

“Love makes me look at what I can’t stand.” That is non-squishy love. That is reconciling love. That’s what it looks like in practice when we encourage ourselves beyond fear, beyond vitriol, beyond resistance. Sometimes we’re just resistant to growth, because we all say we want to grow, but then really? Nah, growth is tough. Growth is hard. To really grow means to look at those places that sometimes we don’t want to look at.

I heard a beautiful example of this kinda reconciling love not too long ago on Voices in the Family, the NPR show with Dan Gottlieb. Mr. Gottlieb had a woman named Kristen Neff on. She studies and cultivates a lot of things that are very close to my own heart. Self-compassion. Mindfulness. Authentic human connections. This is the calling of her life, to cultivate these things and celebrate these things and share these things.

At one point in this beautiful conversation about self-compassion, a woman called in. You could tell from the very outset that she was struggling. You could hear that just calling in was already an act of courage and bravery, because you could hear the tears that were already forming in her eyes. And she said, “All this sounds wonderful to me, but I can’t love myself. I don’t love myself.”

And Dan Gottlieb, who’s just got this rich, wonderful, inviting voice – he could tell, also, as a skilled professional, there’s decades of story and pain behind this. In a two-minute phone call, he wasn’t going to get to all of it.

So instead, he did something really skillful. He said to the caller, “Would you put your hand over your heart?” Maybe you do that here. Put your hand over your heart. See ‘cause I think what he was doing, he was saying, “Where’s the love?” Connect to it. Reconnect to the heart of the matter, the source, the center of our being, literally, metaphorically, biologically, spiritually, something primordial, something ancient and rhythmic and that unites us. Beat by beat by beat by beat with everyone and every thing who has ever lived.

That’s more than a concept. That’s pre-conceptual. Of course it wasn’t all the help that this particular caller needed. But without this signature commitment, this getting in touch with the heart, what healing would be possible? That’s making love the main thing.

These are real moments in all of our lives, and maybe you’re experiencing one of them right now or in this time or season in your life. It’s those moments when you say, “I don’t know what’s going on here. I don’t get it. I don’t understand. I don’t know.” We shut off because that not-knowing brings up feelings of insecurity. Or that not knowing brings feelings of incompetence or self-loathing.

If one of those moments is right now, we know how scary that can be. And yet, here’s the thing. When we make love the main thing for ourselves, we stay in that conversation. And we vow – even if it’s just opening the door just a little bit, just enough to let a little bit of light in, we stay in the conversation. We stay in that dialogue and that conscious contact with our lives. And we open our heart, even if we don’t know what the outcome is. Even in the space and in the place of so much that we don’t know, we can turn back to our lives again, if love is the main thing.

It reminds me of a really beloved piece of the Christian scriptures. “Knowledge puffs up -- RAWR! -- but love builds up.”

Knowledge – RAWR! Let me hear it. Come on.

*[Response:]* RAWR.

*[Laughter]*

The wimpiest lions I've ever heard. I didn't ask for kitty cats. I asked for roars. "Knowledge puffs up." Come on.

[Response:] RAWR.

All right. Fine. Thank you. Awesome. Great job.

"But love builds up." I got a beautiful taste of this in my life really recently working in a context outside of WellSprings. It's a role in which my ability to know stuff is really important. I gotta know my stuff in this role. It was serving me well and serving other people well, until it didn't. Until some misunderstandings started to get involved. Until some of the trust started to ebb away. And no matter how much more I knew or the other folks knew, they're not going to go forward.

And so this thought came to mind. "Knowledge puffs up." I was feeling real puffed up, real prideful. But love builds up. So the next time I talked to these folks, I said, "I'm sorry. I'm sorry that we wound up in this place. It wasn't my intention, and yet here we are." Then some of the other folks in the conversation said, "Yeah, we're sorry too." And love built up, built a connection.

When love is the main thing, we allow ourselves to grow beyond what we know. This reconciling work is also just not about interpersonal relationships. It's about transformation on a wider scale; a place where sometimes people may feel that hopelessness has come to reign. It's another example of what making love the main thing looks like in action.

Some of you might have seen this picture. This still from a piece from NBC News, and this is from a place in a part of the world not as high profile, or will get as much press as bombings by the finish line of a marathon will get, or children slaughtered in Sandy Hook will get, but this is a place where violence is commonplace. This is a picture of the rotunda of a school named Orchard Garden in Roxbury, Massachusetts in Boston. A guy named Andrew Bott was the sixth principal in seven years at this school. This is a place where careers went to die, because this school, if you know anything about Roxbury, this is a tough neighborhood. It's a part of Boston that struggles.

Andrew Bott, perhaps because he had no other choice left before him, other than just playing out the string until he left or got fired, decided to take hundreds of thousands of dollars that were dedicated to locking that school down, towards making it a security fortress – he took hundreds of thousands of dollars and got rid of all the security guards, all that security state apparatus. He invested hundreds of thousands of dollars into art, into creativity and dance and drama, so many of those things that allow the soul to come alive again.

See, that's what happens in our lives, in grand scale or small scale, when we choose to make love the main thing. We take smart, creative risks. We choose to go, as the school did, from defended fortress, closed off, solid, impervious. To, like the name of the school says, Garden Grove. To letting things grow again within us, around us, between us, amongst us.

This school could have embraced more fear. That would've been the logical choice, right? That's what you do in a high-crime area, where kids can't even carry backpacks because they're afraid they're gonna have weapons. They could have continued to treat the kids as suspects, as prisoners yet-to-be, which is how a lot of the world treats them. But instead they chose a different path. Love. Non-sentimental, non-sappy, non-Hallmark-card love. The commitment and desire to see life flourish.

And Orchard Gardens grew green again. Their scores are way up. They've still got a host of problems. Those are not going away any time soon. But Orchard Gardens...

Look where we are here at Montgomery School in Chester Springs, PA. This is some quality education here, and it's not cheap, from what I understand. Look at all this art. Orchard Gardens doesn't look all that different from this.

We recognize when we make love the main thing. We recognize the wisdom of what the biologist Humberto Maturana said, that "love is the only emotion that expands intelligence." Expands intelligence

in terms of creativity, of finding solutions where solutions didn't seem to be apparent. When we make love the main thing, we surprise ourselves with our creativity and our ability to forge connections.

A small group that I'm a part of here at WellSprings we call "Facing Aggression with LovingKindness." It's one of a lot of groups here at WellSprings that are focusing on cultivating qualities of the heart. And facing aggression, of course, is a huge matter, and one eight-week small group is not gonna do all that much to transform it, but who we are here is about planting seeds, little by little by little, and inviting all of us to see where are spaces in your life, in your workplace, in your home, in your family, in your schools, in your relationships, in your friendships, in which that spirit to make love the main thing might open up creative, spacious capacity where right now there feels only tightness and hard-heartedness and shut-downedness?

This is one of those wonderful things about serving a growing congregation is that we get to take more and more seriously the question, not the obligation but the question: How will we be shapers of this larger culture of which WellSprings is a part? A culture that too often goes to the fortress mentality, that goes to the closed-down mentality because of fear, because of anger, because of vitriol, because of misunderstanding?

I want to hold up in more space for us to do this at WellSprings together and to keep our own lives green and growing. We make love the main thing in our lives, and we allow the ultimate facts of our existence. There's just one common human destiny for all of us, regardless of what some dogmas might say, that ultimate fact, one ocean. We're all bound for it. We allow those ultimate facts to match up with the intimate facts.

Place that hand on that heart again, if you would. We all have hearts that beat, and we all have hearts that bleed, the ultimate and the intimate brought together so that we can maybe, just a little bit today, even though we didn't walk in here feeling any love whatsoever, or maybe a whole lot of love – I don't know how you walked in here today. I'm curious to find out – that we can say, we can really feel and ask, "Where's the love?"

Where's the love? I'm asking a question. Thank you. I'm hearing a little bit over here.

*[Laughter]*

Where's the love?

*[Response:]* Right here.

Where's the love?

*[Response:]* Right here!

With enthusiasm, people. Where's the love?

*[Response:]* **Right here!**

Here is the love. Where else could it be?

Amen. And may you live in blessing.

Let's pray together:

Oh, divine and expansive path of love unfurling and embroidering itself in the fabric of our lives, may we invite ourselves this day in our interactions, in our relationships with ourself and with each other, and with all others that we encounter, to make love the main thing. To allow that love to open space within us and to transcend the borders, the barriers that we place upon this life, our ideas of this life, our conceptions of this life. May we invite ourselves to make love the main thing and create clear and distinct and open channels for the workings of love and grace and spirit within us and around us. May it be so, and amen.