

# **SERMON: “ALL GOD”S CHILDREN”**

**ANDREA EEN**

FIRST UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST, NORTHFIELD, MN

NOVEMBER 25, 2007

SCRIPTURE: I CORINTHIANS 12:2-26, 13:1-13

As a professional musician, I have played violin and viola at nearly a hundred weddings for friends and their children, college students, relatives and some strangers. The music has varied: from the orchestral grandeur of Mussorgsky’s” Great Gate of Kiev” played by a valiant string trio with organ, to Pachelbel’s popular “Canon” during which the cellist’s eyes glazed over from the excruciating repetition of eight notes and a gentle nudge of the foot awakened said cellist to the blessed end.

I have also been the solo Hardanger fiddler leading the bride down the aisle with a traditional Norwegian bridal march. Or, on occasion, leading two brides or two grooms to the altar as I did at the weddings of Jerri to Lisa and Marc to Peter.

One of the joys in playing for weddings is meeting with the couple to plan the music. By the time of the wedding, I know something of their hopes for their life together, in addition to their taste in music, which is sometimes another occasion for a gentle nudge. While our society uses different terms to describe weddings where gays or lesbians are joined together (“blessing ceremonies” and “commitment ceremonies”), in my experience there is no difference in their ritual power or in the joy and support of the assembled guests. Or the nature of the love manifested by the couple for each other.

The sense of gravity in making a life-long commitment to one another is heightened by the lack of legal recognition for same-sex marriages in our state of Minnesota. What a powerful step a wedding is for two people! Wedding guests come to witness a Divine consecration of the union and to celebrate the couple’s public declaration of love. A civil ceremony in front of a legal representative while conferring welcome legal protections is not the same thing as a church wedding.

The primary issue in the discussion of same-sex marriage is not whether we can all agree on the Christian or Judaic or Buddhist teachings on homosexuality in a pluralistic America; the issue is whether we value and protect equal rights for all citizens under the law. All major world religions uphold a similar Law of Divine Love: “Do unto others as you would have others do to you,” which would seem to sanction equal treatment for all.

In this denomination, the United Church of Christ, a community that seeks to uphold this teaching, the decision whether to welcome gays and lesbians as full members of the church, to be an “Open and Affirming” congregation in church parlance, is a matter for the local church to study, discuss, and then vote yea or nay. I am proud that our church about fifteen years ago voted to become such an Open and Affirming Congregation.

The primary question I would like to pose to you today is this: How do we make our declaration of Open and Affirming a living matter in the life of First United Church of Christ of Northfield, one that is being renewed in a vital way every week of every year?

And why does it matter to our church to renew this commitment?

I would like to address this second question by quoting some of the scripture passages we have just heard from First Corinthians:

“For by one Spirit we are all baptized into one body – Jews or Greek, slave or free, and all were made to drink of one Spirit.”

The promises of support we make at baptism to those in this congregation are powerful signs of unity; baptism is one of the ways we become a community. One of the cogent arguments for same-sex marriage is that the sacrament of marriage should not be denied to those who have received the sacrament of baptism. As a church body we cannot withhold God’s blessings from some members while granting those privileges to others. Just as all are welcome at our communion table by virtue of breaking bread together and sharing the cup, so God’s blessings should be extended to each member of the church family who wants to celebrate the sacrament of marriage.

Again, from First Corinthians, Chapter 12: “If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together.” Paul is using the metaphor of the parts of the body to represent his vision of the community of the fledgling church he is nurturing. His letter urges unity rather than discord so that “all the members may have the same care for one another.” Isn’t this yet another stating of the Golden Rule of human interaction? And the word for this “care for one another” is compassion.

Marcus Borg, in his wonderful book entitled “Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time”, writes, “Compassion is the fruit of life in the Spirit and the ethos of the community of Jesus.” Borg says that where Jesus uses the word compassion, Paul uses the word love as the primary fruit of the Spirit. Let us listen to the magnificent litany of First Corinthians, Chapter 13, verses 1-7 in the Revised Standard Version with the word “compassion” inserted where Paul writes, “love”.

“If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not “compassion”, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not “compassion”, I am nothing. If I give away all I have, and if I deliver my body to be burned, but have not “compassion”, I gain nothing.”

“Compassion” is patient and kind; “Compassion” is not jealous or boastful; it is not arrogant or rude. “Compassion” does not insist on its own way; it does not rejoice at wrong, but rejoices in the right. “Compassion” bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.”

This is not the compassion of mercy or pity that implies a hierarchical relationship between the parties. This compassion is feeling “with the womb” in the literal root of the Hebrew word, feeling a deep empathy with the other person, as deep as giving birth. The Latin root of the word has the meaning “to suffer along with the pain” of the other.

As Marcus Borg says, “A politics of compassion would generate a more ‘communitarian’ dimension in our political life to balance the excesses generated by the dominant politics of individualism.”

How would a politics of compassion continue to inform OUR work as a congregation? Would WE respond to local human rights abuses, hate crimes, bullying of those who are different in school? Would we try to change discriminatory laws at the state and local level? How would we support adolescents in our community who are struggling with gender identity issues? If we are suffering the injustice of the other in our hearts, what would we be called upon to do as individuals and as a congregation?

This is the charge I would like to see our congregation embrace, in Borg’s words:

“Believing in Jesus in the sense of giving one’s heart to Jesus is the movement from secondhand to firsthand religion, from having heard about Jesus with the hearing of the ear to being in relationship with the Spirit of Christ.”

In the end as well as at the beginning of a life partnership, the community needs to be present with compassion and support.

For the funeral of my brother’s partner, Lawrence, in New York City, I played “What Wondrous Love Is This” on the viola. Lawrence left a big void when he died of AIDS after a distinguished career heading an educational foundation to combat racism. He and my brother, John, had shared many values, including love of music and travel, and strong faith. It was a true marriage in every sense but the legal definition of the word.

I would like us to work as a congregation to enlarge our definition of marriage in Minnesota to include gays and lesbians who love each other and want the privileges and responsibilities of marriage. Then when the end of life comes for one of the partners, the other can be present at the hospital bedside, pay for medical costs through joint insurance, make legal decisions for their partner, inherit the shared value of their life together, and be able to grieve a love relationship that was blessed, not only by church and family, but by the legal protections of our society.

“For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall understand fully, even as I have been fully understood. So faith, hope, love abide, these three, but the greatest of these is love.” (13:12-13)

In closing, please join me in reading the “Litany for Mother’s Day” printed in your bulletin.

SERMON MAY 9, 2004  
FIRST UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST  
NORTHFIELD, MN  
ANDREA EEN

## EMPTINESS AND PLENITUDE

“I give you an emptiness, I give you a plenitude, unwrap them carefully,” are the opening words of a poem I will read to you later in its entirety by the Scottish poet, Norman MacCaig.

Emptiness -- the quiet place from which we can listen to God’s voice speaking to our souls. Plenitude -- the extravagant overflowing of our hearts with love, Divine as well as human love. On this Mother’s Day, love and the gift of grace are my subjects.

The twin opportunities to receive love and to share love are at the center of our Christian faith. The gospel reading from the 22nd chapter of Matthew gives us the essence of Jesus’ teachings: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it. You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets.” In order to prepare to love in this way, with complete heart, soul and mind, we need to create a place deep inside that can respond to Divine love and grace with gratitude.

Two days before Christmas, I received a gift of grace unexpectedly at the service of remembrance for Sidney Rand, former President of St. Olaf College and Ambassador to Norway. I had finished playing prelude music, movements by Bach for viola da gamba. A quickly assembled St. Olaf Alumni Choir was in the balcony of Boe Chapel with me on this brilliantly sunny afternoon. As the choir sang the F. Melius Christianson arrangement of the Norwegian-Danish hymn, “O Day Full of Grace”, I received the full force of these elements: seventy-plus voices singing toward me, the rays of sun illuminating every rainbow color of the stained-glass window, the lush harmonies of the hymn with its thrilling climax about standing in God’s presence. All of the gifts which I had received through music and the opportunity to teach at St. Olaf College for twenty-seven years coalesced in that moment. I was lifted from the shell-shocked weariness, petty resentments and the “taken-for grantedness” of the end of the semester to a transcendent plane of gratitude.

Love and the grace of God come unbidden into our lives and wake us up to what is real beyond the sometime murky shadows of everyday life. Here is the full poem by Norman MacCaig:

## PRESENTS

I give you an emptiness,  
I give you a plenitude,  
unwrap them carefully.  
- one's as fragile as the other -  
and when you thank me  
I'll pretend not to notice the doubt in your voice  
when you say they're just what you wanted.

Put them on the table by your bed.  
When you wake in the morning  
they'll have gone through the door of sleep  
into your head. Wherever you go  
they'll go with you and  
wherever you are you'll wonder,  
smiling about the fullness  
you can't add to and the emptiness  
that you can fill.

“Smiling about the fullness you can't add to and the emptiness that you can fill.” I enjoy the last line of this poem which gives us an image of an energy like air, which can rush into a vacuum to fill an empty space while continuing to be present everywhere. God's love is like that: omnipresent in every breath we take. But at times of doubt in our lives, we believe that we are separated from this Divine Gift of Love and Grace.

In the book, “The Path to Love,” Deepak Chopra writes:

“Look into the eyes of your beloved and learn to believe that love is really there. The ego, with all its fears and self-interests, blocks your ability to perceive the portion of God that your beloved is offering you.”

There are two wonderful images here for me. First, when we receive love from another, we are receiving “a portion of God.” God's love is shining through the beloved's eyes, radiating from the encircling arms and the gentle fingers stroking your cheek. The second image shows the ego using fear to block our reception of this gift from the beloved. Fear, not hate, is the true opposite of love. When our narcissism and personal agenda cloud our vision, we fail to see God's love in every loving gesture and word. The ego is cold, calculating, always thinking, “What's in it for me?” The ego sees love as a transaction, as a limited commodity that needs to be clutched tightly lest it disappears

forever. The ego does not trust the beneficence of God, this never-ending flow of support and grace which is available to us at any moment. All we have to do to receive is to open our hearts, create the empty vessel which can be filled again and again: "I give you an emptiness, I give you a plenitude."

Mother's Day is not an invention of the Hallmark Company. Julia Ward Howe, feminist author of the Battle Hymn of the Republic, challenged women in Boston in 1872 to join her in a "Mother's Day for Peace." She was upset by the tragic effects of the Civil War, the pain of mothers losing sons or themselves being widowed. It is good to think that this day, which has been often cheapened and sentimentalized in recent decades, began as a plea for peace in a war-fractured society. As we Americans endure the daily revelations of torture and abuse of our prisoners in Iraq and the death toll on both sides mounts, it is comforting to remember the power that individuals have had to speak out against injustice and to effect change in this nation. A few years earlier than Julia Ward Howe, Ann Jarvis had pushed for the establishment of Mother's Work Days to recognize mothering as meaningful work, necessary to the functioning of society. In our nation we have never needed the nurturing, loving spirit of peacemaking inherent in the history of Mother's Day more than we do today. Mother's Day offers us a chance to reflect on the sacred feminine, the wisdom embodied in the Old Testament readings today as a personified Sophia who brings "happiness and the paths of peace."

Andrew Harvey, in his book, "The Return of the Mother," offers this definition of sacred feminine wisdom:

"The wisdom of the sacred feminine is one that knows beyond all concepts or dogmas that this experience, this process of life we are all in, is holy in its most minute detail. A so-called 'ordinary' life is not ordinary at all, but is one unbroken flow of normal miracle. So this sacred wisdom, this wisdom of adoration that rises out of immersion in divine love, does not separate anything - heaven from earth, spirit from body, thought from action - for in all dimensions and all worlds, all possibilities are here, are interrelated, are one."

This supreme gift of love through birth we all received from our mothers. Our mothers bore us after nurturing us for nine months in their bodies. That gift of life from God through our mothers is a central mystery of love. In my own life, I remember other gifts I received from my mother, Betty Jean: music in song and dance, playfulness, a healthy sense of the absurd; from her mother, Betty Florentine Rosine: dress-up clothes and make-believe, German streusel apple coffee cake, long games of Canasta; from my father's mother, Lavina: resourcefulness, love of Norway, courage to improvise what I didn't know. I remember with gratitude the female teachers and mentors, many of them unmarried women, who mothered me and others with similar passion and dedication.

I invite each of you to make your own list this week of the women who have mothered you in the many stages of your life. Name them aloud. Then I ask you to pray for them, to send them a note of thanks, to give a phone call or to honor their memory if they have passed on. We are privileged to be able to express gratitude for the gifts of love and grace which have helped us to grow and flourish, gifts which live on through us, far beyond the lifetime of the giver.

Then we can say truthfully to each of these we have named, in the words of Solomon:

“Set me as a seal upon your heart,  
as a seal upon your arm,  
for love is strong as death.”

“I give you an emptiness,  
I give you a plenitude,  
unwrap them carefully . . .”