

CHOCOLATE FOR THE SOUL

A SERMON BY THE REVEREND JOHN MOREHOUSE

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They called him the “hugging judge,” as opposed to the hanging judge. His name is Glen Shapiro and he received the honor from his fellow judges for his off-the-bench style of showing everyone unconditional love by asking if they would like a hug. He carried with him something he called the “hug kit” which was a small box filled with little heart shaped chocolate candies. He would walk up to anyone he knew outside of his courtroom and ask them if they wanted a chocolate heart in exchange for a hug. It wasn’t as if he was any more lenient in his judgments. He believed in honest consequences for breaking the law. He was, after all, a practitioner of tough love. Word of his habit of hugging people got to a local TV reporter who decided to follow up on this. “Why do you this?” asked the reporter. “Hugging” said the Judge “is like chocolate for the soul.” “But surely” said the reporter “you can’t give everyone a hug.” “I mean even the people you sentence?! I mean come on!” Judge Shapiro had to admit he rarely hugged someone he had sentenced because they were often escorted right to jail but he held

to his stand that he would hug anyone who needed one. “Fine” said the reporter, “let’s just see!” And they followed him around, camera crew and all, for a day. On the street he came across a lady who looked like she needed a hug. “Hi” said Judge Shapiro, “my name is Glen Shapiro and I’m the hugging judge. I’m offering these little heart candies in exchange for a hug. Would you like one?” The lady stepped back for a moment with alarm, but then her face softened and she said “Sure, why not?” and she got a hug. “That was easy,” said the reporter. “How about someone a little more challenging? How about the panhandler on the corner?” Shapiro agreed, and up to the man he went. “Hi,” he said, “my name is Glen Shapiro and I’m the hugging judge. I’m offering this little heart chocolate for a hug. Would you like one?” The old man looked at him for a moment without expression and then broke out into a broad smile. “No one has ever made me a deal like that,” he said, and the hug and chocolate were exchanged. The reporter was amazed. The old man turned to the reporter and said “And what are you offering?” The reporter was a bit humbled and handed the man a five-dollar bill.

“O.K.” said the reporter, “here is one you won’t be able to do – hug a bus driver.” Now San Francisco bus drivers are known for being some of the toughest in the business - must have something to do with all those hills. But Judge Shapiro was up to the

challenge. They stood on the corner, with the camera crew standing back out of immediate sight, and up pulled the bus. “Hi!” says Judge Shapiro, through the door, “I’m Glen Shapiro, the hugging judge. I’m giving out these little hearts in exchange for a hug. You look like you could really use one today. How about it?” The driver looked at him for a moment and then stood his 6 foot, 4inch, 270 pound body up and stepped out the bus. “Why not?!” he barked and the poor judge almost got crushed by love.

The reporter was convinced and went off to report the story. The next day, a clown friend of Judge Shapiro’s called him up and said “Glen, I’m visiting the home for the severely disabled today, why don’t you come along and give out some hugs?” So Judge Shapiro picked up his hug kit and met up with his friend. The job proved to be much more challenging for the judge than all of his tests the day before. Some of you know that the severely disabled are often unresponsive and not able to control their bodies. Glen Shapiro had a heart-wrenching time giving his hugs to people who didn’t always understand what he was asking. After an hour or so, he confided in his clown friend that he had always expected more appreciation than he had thought he was really asking for. The clown smiled, “we have one more to see” she said. And they came to a man in a wheel chair the doctors called Fred, a middle aged man who wasn’t moving, his head hanging down, and drool

falling unto his white bib. It was almost too much even for the hugging judge. “Let’s go,” he told his friend, “He wouldn’t understand the hug” “Oh, come on, Glen,” said the clown, “Fred here is a human being like anyone else. Everyone knows love when they feel it.” So, with a gulp, Judge Shapiro put the little red heart on Fred’s chair and gave him the biggest hug he could manage. When the judge stepped back and looked around the room there wasn’t a dry eye in the house. Shapiro asked what was up. The doctor said “It’s a miracle. Fred hasn’t smiled in 40 years. Look at him now.” And when Judge Shapiro looked back at the man he had just hugged there was the biggest smile he had ever seen. Suddenly the judge found himself sobbing. As his clown friend held him, he told her, “now I know who is hugging whom. As a child my family never touched. I was just like Fred. I’m not giving out hugs, I’m getting them for me.” (Adapted from Victor Hansen’s CHICKEN SOUP FOR THE SOUL, Vol. 1)

The French philosopher, Montaigne once wrote: “If I am pressed to say why I love him, I feel it can only be explained, because what once I thought was he is me.” Today I come to you with perhaps the deepest practice to growing your spirit and that is the practice of love. The practice of love is, I believe, chocolate for the soul. It helps us open up to the sweet possibilities of being together even if we are beset with bitterness. Inviting love into our hearts, begins

with the first and vital message: that the love we practice, we practice not so much for the other as for ourselves. Perhaps that is why the chocolate communion is so surprising. We picked that chocolate for us, and now we have to give it away? Each one of us brings to our relations, no matter what they are, our pains and our needs. For Judge Shapiro, as for Montaigne, as for millions more, the true driving force behind loving another is not really what we give others but what we gain. Love might very well be the least altruistic of virtues. After all, who doesn't want to taste the chocolate first? This is not a bad thing. By understanding what pains we carry we can help ourselves by loving others with that same pain. So often I suggest someone else, perhaps a professional, perhaps any of you, to join with me in ministering to a special need within someone in our congregation. I do this because I have come to realize that in order to love someone in special way, we too must need to be loved that way. We are all, as the great mystic Henri Nowen once said "wounded healers".

I come to you in that same confession. My ministry, my love for you, for my family, for Frances, comes from my own needs first. I am far below perfection in speaking to you today about my desire for the soul's chocolate. Like Judge Shapiro, I talk a good line but I have my pains and my failures. I have failed at love many times. I have been hurt and have hurt the ones I loved. I struggled with

one marriage, which ended in divorce. Most of that pain, like most of your pain, is very private. And so it should be. There is a difference between getting help for our problems and broadcasting those problems to the world.

Once we come to realize that the first and most important habit of the heart is to recognize your own need for love, we can begin to love those who, like us, need that same love. Love is not a wealth to be given away. It is a poverty to be filled. (repeat) I return to the often mis-understood myth of Narcissus. Narcissus only cared about himself until he saw his reflection in a pool of water and fell in never to be seen again. It was only when Narcissus realized that he was human and not a god that he could be released from his self-love.

The lesson for our spirit is this: it is good to need love, for the love of others completes our humanity; and the best way to find this love is in loving others. This is why the chocolate communion is so important. This piece of loving others is what I mean by the chocolate for the soul. It is in these practices of love, this soul's box of chocolates, that we grow spiritually as human beings.

Love for our fellow beings extends to whoever needs it most, regardless of their mental condition, their sexual orientation or the color of their skin. This is Black History month and I have been

reading deeply into one of the great early leaders of black identity, W.E.B. Dubois, a man who understand that love is the center of human nature, the essence of who we are below our skin.

Du Bois was the most prominent intellectual leader and political activist on behalf of African Americans in the first half of the twentieth century. A contemporary of Booker T. Washington, the two carried on a dialogue about segregation and political disenfranchisement. He was labeled "The Father of Pan-Africanism."

In 1905, Du Bois helped to found the Niagara Movement with William Monroe Trotter but their alliance was short-lived as they had a dispute over whether or not white people should be included in the organization and in the struggle for Civil Rights. Du Bois felt that they should, and with a group of like-minded supporters, he helped found the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in 1909.

.....(Wikipedia, 2007)

As Dr. Dubois wrote:

“The main thing is the YOU beneath the clothes and skin-- the ability to do, the will to conquer, the determination to understand and know this great, wonderful, curious world.”

In other words, the bottom line must be love. Jesus understood this, Mother Teresa understood this, Dr. Dubois understood this, our own Unitarian prophet Francis David understood this when he wrote “that we do not have to think alike to love alike.

The practice of love is practiced in the actions towards justice outwardly, as I am reminded by our own Social Justice committee and their recent work raising money and supporting legislation to stop the femicide of women in Guatemala. But sometimes it begins so much more intimately and close to home.

What Judge Shapiro so faithfully showed in his exchange of chocolate for hugs is the power of touch. Love is practiced best when we touch. For all the loving words told in our story to Fred, it was finally the hug – the touch – which opened his smile. Now, where we get hung up is in the appropriateness of touch. In our abuse-ridden culture, we have grown suspicious of touching at all. It is in the appropriateness of the touch that love's sweetness first rests. Hugging anyone, with his or her permission is a wonderful habit. I used to cringe, at workshops when the leader would suggest shoulder rubs or hugs. But I realized that it was my own pain at not being touched that kept me back. And while I am not a zestful hugger, I am working on it. I suggest you, too, give it a try. Our youth learn the five-second rule. That a hug of more than five seconds, except with very close friends, borders on the inappropriate. You will know. But some touch, even if only a touch on the arm is truly sweet and good for the soul. Now of course, the habit of touch can run much deeper. For those committed to sexual love, by mutual consent, there is no better

way to give and receive love. I cannot urge couples more strongly to not use sex as a weapon or a threat in their struggles.

Sometimes sexual love is all that we have to remind ourselves of why we are together. Sex does not excuse the problems of the relationship – surely the issues of trust, reciprocity and honesty need discussion and time. But all too often, and all too sadly, sexual love is the first to go when troubles appear, and it makes the journey back from heartache that much harder. To be touched, when appropriate, is to be human, and next to food and shelter, it may be just be the most important need we have. I should say here that I make no distinction about sexual love between sexes. Love's chocolate should be equally available to all people regardless of their gender. Such love can, and most often does, grow into commitment between all people, gay or straight. This is why I support equality of marriage between any two people in love and have taken a public stand on television and in our community to support the right of all people to love in that deeply committed way. No one should be denied chocolate for the soul. No one.

But regardless of who you love I have learned another important lesson, and that is to give up on the quest for the perfect in the ones you love. You will never find the perfect chocolate. Your parents will never be all that you wanted, your children will almost always fall short of expectations, your mate will annoy you in some way

until the end of your days, your friends will disappoint you, but they are still the ones you love. To expect them to be something they are not is to set yourself up for heartache. In my weddings I urge each mate to accept the other simply as they are. Most often, what you see is what you get, even if it has a shiny wrapper. Make a habit of looking for their strengths and relying on those and excusing their weaknesses. Love is not the same as suitability. In fact, being suitable for each other might be a poor measure for love. There is a mystery of love that transcends the reasonable. It is often in the faults of the other that we find our strengths and grow. I am good at words, Frances is better with feelings. The point is clear. Accept that you are as imperfect as your loved one and you will find the strengths you each need. I am reminded here of the chocolate commercial “Almond Joy’s got nuts, Mounds don’t”.

Another way to enjoy the soul’s chocolate is to accept that you will never understand each other completely. The mystery of how two people can be in a relationship as mate, parent, child or friend and never know every little secret about them used to baffle me. Now I accept it as an extension of ourselves. “Only the shallow know themselves,” wrote Oscar Wilde. The mysteries of our own feelings are great enough, how can we expect others to know us

better than we know ourselves? Sort of like biting into a mysterious piece of chocolate, eh?

Perhaps the most difficult chocolate to savor is the acceptance that love is both heaven and hell. I have seen the most strained of relations turn from utter agony to pure bliss. What you must realize in any loving relationship is that a mountain needs a valley to be complete and the valley is more a valley because it has a mountain over it. It takes the peaks and valleys to make a love. And they run in cycles. Some of these cycles are not healthy, especially if someone you love is hurting you, but the agony and the ecstasy are just a part of love's landscape. In a box of chocolate there will always be one or two that you don't like. You will have to learn to live with it all.

To do this I urge you to try the habit of being polite. Along with practicing politeness and respect for the others feelings (as scary as that sometimes is) comes the sweet duty of what Rile called "protecting each other's intimacy". The word intimacy means "profoundly interior". Those who do well at love practice the habit of protecting the other's intimacy. What this means is that you give the other room (sometimes even physical room as in Virginia Wolfe's Dream of "A Room of Her Own") – you give the one you love the room to feel what they are feeling whether it is sadness,

joy or anger. Don't try to change them. Women seem to understand this need better than men. None of us like to see the ones we love hurt or sad or angry, and our natural inclination is to change that..Well, don't. Let them be until they ask for your help. And likewise, don't demand the other be as down and out as you are. It was a standup comedian some years ago who related the alarming truth that the relationship of two sinks to the lowest common denominator.

To savor love we have to protect each other's intimacy. To do this you must work on your own confidence so that you can function for a while without the other telling you what to do. It moves on to hearing what the other has to say without interrupting them. Keep, as one poet once said, your relationship "moist with conversation". Conversation is not the same thing as communication. We cannot always talk about our problems like some problem to be solved. Nothing sterilizes love faster than paralysis by analysis. Sometimes there is not an answer, but only an acceptance that you each feel very differently.

Keep your love moist and sweet by sharing your dreams with each other. Dreams are deeply interior parts of us. By simply sharing the images of our dreams with the ones we love, we move beyond the everyday and offer up to ourselves something deeper

than can be communicated through normal words. Images, fears, hopes, these are what dreams tell. Don't try to interpret the dreams, but simply tell each other your dream. Let the images and feelings of the other wash over you. But the dreams we share are not only the nocturnal, but also the hopes for the future. Each night the poor man and woman would tell each other parts of that very same vision: of the house in the country, the garden, the birds, each night until they died. Those who knew them laughed at their dream. But their daughter did not, for she knew that the dream they dreamed was the home they had finally come to.

“Experience” wrote Antoine de Saint-Euxpery, “shows that love does not consist in gazing at each other but in looking together in the same direction.”

The sweetest chocolate for the soul however lies in giving time to the one you love. If I have learned anything, it is that, for the most part, the more time you spend with the ones you love, the sweeter your love will be. Her father sat before her paralyzed on one side of his body by stroke and his days were few, he lamented to his daughter that he had not told her enough that he loved her. The girl, now a woman, replied, “the words would have been strong enough, Daddy, but you spoke about your love in every extra hour of every extra day you carved away for me and just for

me”. There is no such thing as quality time; there is only time. Spend it with the ones you love doing nothing at all if you have to, but spend it to be sure.

All of these sweet chocolates of the soul, of course, are sorely tested in a world of evil and heartache. Those we love will leave us. We will face great loss; we will have ample opportunity to become bitter about love. When evil rushes in or when the ones you loved leave you for whatever reason, then you must practice the hardest habit of all: forgiveness. I know more people who are estranged by some ancient hurt that only forgiveness can heal. And not the forgiveness of another alone, but starting with the forgiveness of yourself for having failed. Forgiveness is the most bitter chocolate in the box. Twenty-four years later a father finds the nerve to seek out his son. At first the young man is angry but when he realizes that his father is not seeking pity his heart opens to know the man he lost. Forgiveness taps into the great stream of love that flows like an underground river in each of us. “Many waters cannot quench love, neither can floods drown it” it is written in the Song of Solomon.

The chocolates in this box of a sermon are only a starting point to deepening the love which, when allowed to flow, waters our spirit like no other power in the universe. If fully practiced it

would be indeed a powerful force on earth. I close with these words by the French mystic Teilhard d'Chardin: "After we have harnessed the seas and the tides and the heavens. After we have conquered the sun, we will harness the greatest force of all the universe, love, and we will discover, for the second time, fire."

Blessings Be!