Connections

Welcome to the Unitarian Universalist Church of Chattanooga. I am Matt Hoyt. At this time we begin with Connections. This a time where we share the triumphs and hardships in our lives. Where we can reflect on what is happening about us. This is not a time for announcements, political statements, or expressions of anger. We share our happiness and thereby multiply our joy; and we share our pain, thereby easing the burden we carry.

If you have something to share, please do so. Come forward; tell us your name; and what is on your mind. After each person has spoken, give us a moment to contemplate what they said. If what you share is too personal to share with the congregation, please say so and it won't be mentioned in the worship service.

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Spirit we share, let us rejoice in the successes mentioned here. Bring those with pain or suffering the clarity and peace to see those trials through and let our sympathy help them. Let love surround us. Let us contemplate what has been shared and offer hope for any events too painful to be shared.

[Silence]

Amen, let it be so, truly.

[Stinger]

Rejoin the world; stand now and greet your friends at the door. Share your love.

Good morning and welcome to the Unitarian Universalist Church of Chattanooga. My name is Jeff Briere and I am the minister of this church. Let's begin with Hymn 95, "There Is More Love Somewhere."

Hymn 95: There Is More Love Somewhere

Greetings

Kristie. Thanks so much for joining us in worship today. We hope you find the service rewarding and that you leave here inspired and uplifted. And thank you so much for helping to create a reverent atmosphere during *Connections.*

If you have a particular **joy or sorrow** or something you'd like added to the prayer of the people, please clearly write it on an index card and drop it in the basket back there. You may sign it or not, as you wish.

A complete listing of announcements is included with the bulletin. The best way to find out what's happening around here is to sign up for a weekly e–mail. To do that, please see Chris in the office.

The choir brings music of the season this morning, with songs of love.

Prelude: Look Inside for Love

LIGHTING THE CHALICE

Mary Hunter, would you light our chalice, please? Our reading this morning comes from the pen of Patrick Murfin. Your words are in italics.

Love is the only magic.

It enriches the giver as it nourishes the object.
It serves the instant and washes over the ages.

It is as particular as the moon and as universal as the heavens.
If returned it is multiplied, yet spurned it is not diminished.

It is as lusty as the rutting stag but chaste as the unicorn's pillow.
It comes alike to the king on his throne and the cutpurse in the market.

If you would have magic, place faith in love or nothing.

LOVE STORY: Love You Forever

You ever heard a love story? I mean a real love story, not just a romance or a Hallmark movie. Skip and Karl have a love story for you this morning, a real love story.

A mother held her new baby and very slowly rocked him back and forth, back and forth, back and forth. And while she held him, she sang:

SKIP. I'll love you forever,
I'll like you for always,
As long as I'm living
my baby you'll be.

The baby grew. He grew and he grew and he grew. He grew until he was two years old, and he ran all around the house. He pulled all the books off the shelves. He pulled all the food out of the refrigerator and he took his mother's watch and flushed it down the toilet. Sometimes his mother would say, "This kid is driving me *crazy*."

But at night time, when her son was quiet, she opened the door to his room, crawled across the floor, looked up over the side of his bed; and if he was really asleep she picked him up and rocked him back and forth, back and forth, back and forth. While she rocked him she sang:

SKIP. I'll love you forever,
I'll like you for always,
As long as I'm living
my baby you'll be.

The little boy grew. He grew and he grew and he grew. He grew until he was nine years old. And he never wanted to come in for dinner, he never wanted to take a bath, and when grandma visited he always said bad words. Sometimes his mother wanted to give him to the *zoo!*

But at night time, when he was asleep, his mother quietly opened the door to his room, crawled across the floor and

looked up over the side of the bed. If he was really asleep, she picked him up and rocked him back and forth, back and forth, back and forth. And while she rocked him she sang:

SKIP. I'll love you forever,
I'll like you for always,
As long as I'm living
my baby you'll be.

The boy grew. He grew and he grew and he grew. He grew until he was a teenager. He had strange friends and he wore strange clothes and he listened to strange music. Sometimes the mother felt like *she* was in a *zoo!*

But at night time, when he was asleep, the mother opened the door to his room, crawled across the floor and looked up over the side of the bed. If he was really asleep she picked up that great big boy and rocked him back and forth, back and forth, back and forth. While she rocked him she sang:

SKIP. I'll love you forever,
I'll like you for always,
As long as I'm living
my baby you'll be.

That teenager grew. He grew and he grew and he grew. He grew until he was a grown up man. He left home and got a house across town. But sometimes on dark nights the mother got into her car and drove across town.

If all the lights in her son's house were out, she opened his bedroom window, crawled across the floor, and looked up over the side of his bed. If that great big man was really asleep she picked him up and rocked him back and forth, back and forth, back and forth. And while she rocked him she sang:

SKIP. I'll love you forever,
I'll like you for always,
As long as I'm living
my baby you'll be.

Well, that mother, she got older. She got older and older and older. One day her son came to visit her. When he came in the door she sang:

SKIP. I'll love you forever,
I'll like you for always...

But she couldn't finish because she was too old and sick.

The son went to his mother. He picked her up and rocked her back and forth, back and forth, back and forth. And he sang this song:

KARL. I'll love you forever,
I'll like you for always,
As long as I'm living
my Mother you'll be.

When he got home that night, the son walked upstairs and stood very still for a long time at the top of the stairs.

Then he went into the room where his very new baby daughter was sleeping. He picked her up in his arms and very slowly rocked her back and forth, back and forth, back and forth. And while he rocked her he sang:

KARL. I'll love you forever,
I'll like you for always,
As long as I'm living
my baby you'll be.

Did you love that story? I hope you did. Thank you for listening and you can go to your classes now.

CHILDREN'S RECESSIONAL

We hold you in our love
as you go, as you go
May your heart
be at peace as you go.

To nurture the spark
of your precious life
We hold you in our love
as you go.

LOVE STORY: I Can't Leave Her

MINISTER. One of the most attractive aspects of love is it constancy. We derive great comfort and security from knowing that our lover or the ones we love will be around for the foreseeable future. We use words like forever, always, steadfast and true.

In a small, but important way, we define ourselves by those we love or those who love us. "I am Kate's husband," I say. She's my wife. We are who we are by virtue of whom we love.

And so if I stopped thinking about myself as Kate's husband, I'd have to re-identify myself. I'd have to re-imagine myself, and that is a hefty task, one which I don't want to undertake. One which I cannot imagine. So it's not surprising that the constancy we feel in loving reinforces our sense of who we are, underscores our identity. And that's something we want to continue.

This story is about that constancy, about that devotion lovers have to each other and how that supports their identity.

HEATHER. Ten years ago, I invited my mother for a visit.

She loved to travel, but my 83-year-old father would no longer travel anywhere from their California home. So she declined kindly, saying, "No, he would never leave me."

A few months later my mother was devastated by a severe stroke, leaving her paralyzed, unable to speak, not responsive to our questions. But she was usually aware of my sister and me and most especially of my Dad. She now smiles at us when we arrive and sometimes at our little jokes and family stories.

But she is unable to care for herself in any way and has been in a nursing home ever since the stroke. And so has my father—not as a resident, but as a daily, without fail, visitor.

Most of every day he is there—feeding her, massaging her wasted muscles, reading to her, telling her of any news from friends and family, rubbing her back, singing little songs, showing her family photo albums—watching over her in every way he can and helping her be more comfortable.

My Dad is eighty-eight now and he has become a legend in the nursing home because of his devotion. He has been with my mother every day since that terrible evening—the night of their 59th wedding anniversary. I see her look at him and I know that she knows that he would never leave her—as she wasn't willing to leave him either, even for a short family visit.

So. This is what my Dad has taught me about devotion and caring and compassion and love and duty—and he has never been one to give advice.

Only the example of his life.

OFFERTORY: My Funny Valentine

Once a month, this congregation donates the entire Sunday morning collection to an outside agency working to make the world a better place. We will do that today as we Share the Plate with the Chattanooga Interfaith Homeless Network. The Chattanooga Interfaith Homeless Network provides shelter and sustenance through its 40 member congregations to homeless families who are making their way out of an intolerable situation.

IHN provides homeless families with temporary evening lodging, meals, transportation and assistance finding work, training, education, housing, counseling and supportive services. They operate every day and night of the year and they are grateful for your support.

We'll collect the morning offering now for the support of the Chattanooga Interfaith Homeless Network. Please be generous when the plate is comes your way. If you have a pledge payment, please mark it as such. As always, the Wood–Wilhoit Memorial Food Bank is happy to accept your donations of non–perishable food and household items for the Community Kitchen. The collection basket for that is by the front door. If you wish to light a personal candle of joy or sorrow, you may step up here and Mary Hunter will assist you.

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Eternal Spirit of life and love, we are profoundly thankful for the blessings we experience today. Would that we recognize our blessings every day and remember to be thankful for them.

Christina—and Jesse—please lead us in our Hymn of Thanksgiving.

HYMN OF THANKSGIVING

Oh, we give thanks, for this precious day,
For all gathered here, and those far away,
For this time we share, with love and care,
Oh, we give thanks, for this precious day.

ORISON

Dona Nobis Pacem. Give Us Peace. *Dona Nobis Pacem.*

I am sure that people everywhere are pleased that the revolution in Egypt was not extremely violent and that President Mubarak finally came to his senses. Nearly every pundit and now President Obama has suggested that the Egyptian people establish some form of representative democracy. I pray they can do that, that the Egyptian military sees the value in a democracy and that the more extreme elements are sidelined.

Thou, which are everywhere,
Many are your names.
May we always feel your presence,
May your wisdom guide us,
In our deeds as well as in our dreams.
May we have what sustains our body and soul;
Lead us first to forgive the mistakes of others
Even as we hope our own mistakes will soon be forgiven.
May we resist the temptation of the quick and easy,
And be delivered from that which demeans and destroys life.
May we live purposefully and joyfully
in every moment, in every encounter,
now, and in the time to come.

During this time of silence let us hold close to our hearts those who are suffering and rejoice with those who are jubilant, but let us never forget those who suffer the fallout of war.

Dona Nobis Pacem. Give Us Peace. *Dona Nobis Pacem.*

RESPONSE

When our heart is in a holy place
When our heart is in a holy place
We are blessed with love and amazing grace
When our heart is in a holy place

LOVE STORY: Old Love & New Pajamas

MINISTER. Love will make you do nutty things, that's for sure. What could it be that has such power over people that they would risk what they have for what they imagine might be? What could possibly be so wonderful that it would dispel common sense, induce recklessness and still be attractive?

Passion. That's a polite word for sex.

It's real easy to confuse love with passion. The symptoms are nearly the same. I am sure that someone before me has compared passion to hot pepper. Passion can sure heat up a loving relationship, but passion alone will not let the flavor of love come through. Like a good pot of chili beans, you have to cook a relationship for a long time over low heat to taste the flavor of love.

I'll bet I'm the first to compare a love affair to a pot of chili beans.

I have confused love with passion, haven't you? Learning the difference between them is not easy, because you lose your perspective in a passionate embrace. This story is about a man who lost his perspective and had to hit

himself upside the head to regain it.

JOHN. I have reached the age when I wonder what happened to people I knew when I was young.

There was one special girl I met at a USO dance when I was in the Navy. We had a one-week love affair I never forgot, but I was shipped out before I could tell her I was leaving and we lost touch. After the war, I married someone else, had kids, a career and all those things.

Well, I wanted to find out about this girl. So I hired a private investigator to look for her and he found her. She was living in Palm Springs and since I live in Los Angeles, I thought I would just call her up and go see her. She was really glad to hear from me, especially after I explained why I had disappeared.

So I went to see her. We had a wonderful time. And it felt like we were kids again. She was just as attractive to me as I was to her. She said that life was short and we ought to spend a weekend together like old times.

I went back home with fire in my heart. When I looked at myself in the mirror, I didn't look so good. If I was going to spend a romantic weekend, I would need some decent covering. I'm an old man with old man's habits, and I have always slept naked and slopped around the house in an old pair of house slippers and a bathrobe I've had forever. I couldn't go to Palm Springs with these things.

I went down to the store and bought two pairs of nice pajamas, a silk bathrobe, and some new house slippers. I got some new underwear and socks, too. When I got home, I began unwrapping my new romantic wardrobe when my wife walked in. She was really pleased because she was tired of the way I dressed for bed. Now I had to lie to her about why I bought new pajamas and I had to wear them, too. I felt awful.

I have never worn pajamas and am not used to them. That night when I was trying to put them on, I got one leg in and the other leg stuck in the waistband and hopped around until I lost my balance. I fell backwards in the bathroom and hit my head, knocking myself cuckoo. I cut my head and got a concussion.

The next thing I knew I woke up in the hospital and I couldn't remember why.

My wife brought me several new night shirts to replace my pajamas, but I couldn't remember why I had pajamas in the first place. Slowly it all came back to me. I called my old girlfriend to explain, but she didn't believe me. She said it was the last time I was ever going to stand her up and slammed down the phone.

It's just as well. I'm getting used to sleeping in night shirts. Old love and new pajamas are dangerous.

LOVE STORY: A Nice Jewish Boy

MINISTER. There's a huge spectrum on which human love can appear. The spectrum could loosely be described as running from the personal to the political. At the personal end is passionate erotic love, and there you'll find Orpheus and Eurydice, Romeo and Juliet, Abelard & Eloise. At the political end of the spectrum is *agape,* brotherly love, love of humanity, and there you'll find Mother Theresa, Albert Schweitzer and Mahatma Ghandi.

In between the extremes are more loves than I can imagine, at least one for every human being on earth, now or ever: Parental love, brotherly love, puppy love, young love, old love, secret love, missed love, tough love, lost love, free love, first love, last love, mad love, true love and muskrat love. We are lovelorn or lovesick. We are love birds, building a love nest, sending love letters, having a love child and drinking love potions. And so many more.

And with so many possibilities of love, it's not surprising that the word love is used in so many ways. People talk of being in love with someone they've never met, with someone with whom they share an elevator, with the postman, with their teachers, the paperboy, with their jobs, with their houses,...well, the possibilities are endless.

One thing is for certain. Love is not the exclusive province of one man and one woman. There are as many varieties of love as are human beings.

MARCIA. I chose love over safety and societal acceptance. And it's the best choice I've ever made.

After graduating from college, I went alone to South America to travel and work. Three months into my trip I met and fell in love with a Chilean named Carlos. We had a brief and exhilarating love affair, but I returned to Berkeley ready to do the traditional thing—find a nice Jewish boy, have a big wedding, make my mother happy.

And then I fell in love. I fell in love hard, crazily, head over heels, unable to do anything but think about how in love I was. We spent two glorious weeks lying in bed, talking and talking, connecting with our minds and our bodies. The only problem was that my new love was a woman.

When we met, Jill had been casually dating a man and like me had sworn off women.

My mind said, "Katie, this is not a nice Jewish boy. Why make life hard for yourself?"

But my heart said, "Katie, you'd be an absolute fool to let her go."

Well, I listened to my heart. And, thanks to my heart, I've never been happier. Jill is my best friend and my lover. She is my co-conspirator, my confidante and the most natural person I know.

She taught me what it's like to grow up working class. I taught her how to win at Scrabble. Collectively we've been through eight years of medical school, three years of residency, deaths in the family, times of extreme bliss and times of just trying to survive. Our relationship is ever evolving.

It's not always been easy. The windshield of our car was painted with "We kill homosexuals and we'll get you too." I've struggled against my own homophobia. But it's a struggle I've never regretted.

And in one month our first child will be born.

MINISTER. The title of my sermonette, "Common Clay Royals," comes from a lecture given in 1929 by Robert Ingersoll. He said, "Love is the magician, the enchanter that changes worthless things to joy, and makes right royal kings and queens of common clay. It is the perfume of that wondrous flower, the heart, and without that sacred passion, that divine swoon, we are less than beasts; but with it, earth is heaven, and we are gods."

Ingersoll was on a roll with his metaphors, wasn't he?

Love is a magician, an enchanter. Well, we know that's true. Just look what it did to the guy who bought new pajamas. But it's Ingersoll's contention that love elevates us to the status of a divinity or at least a king or queen, that really got my attention. Love makes kings and queens of common clay. It is a "sacred passion," he said; a "divine swoon." Love turns earth into heaven.

Becoming divine. Although Ingersoll was speaking in metaphorical language, that's still a powerful image. And without love, we are "less than beasts," lower even than a worm.

Becoming divine. The overall point to Islam, Christianity and Judaism is be reunited in happiness with your creator. In Buddhism, it is to release yourself from this life and achieve enlightenment. In other words, to become divine.

So can we become divine by loving?

Love lifts us up where we belong, to quote a popular song. Before love came along, we were lower than worms. We were the common clay through which the worms slithered. Now love has made us "right royal kings and queens."

Common clay into royalty. Earth into heaven. Human into divine.
Love fuses two people into something stronger and makes each lover feel whole and complete. Two individuals die and one stronger couple is born. The two come together to grasp what is beyond the reach of either one alone. Because it feels so glorious to join with another, I am tempted to believe that we are not complete as human beings until we connect with another; until we love another; until our individuality is obliterated by the union with another.

However, I believe love has to be taught, or caught. For me, that has been a very long process. In my family, emotions were not visible, love was not on display and hugs were non–existent. My mother loved me, in the way she learned love. And the house I grew up in was the house she grew up in and her mother—my grandmother—was still living there and the head of the household. So the way that my mother learned love was the same way I learned. Or didn't learn.

I think my mother and grandmother loved me—I had clothes, food, a room, toys and all that I could want, or nearly all. And I loved them, as much as I was able. But I truly don't recall any one of us saying anything about our feelings to one another.

So for me, love wasn't taught and I didn't catch it until much later in life, when I met Kate. And it has been good ever since, because something divine holds us together like glue.

I am reminded of the often–repeated explanation that "God is love." For if the point of existence is to be re-united with your creator, if the point of existence is to lose your earthly ties and ascend to a higher plane, could it be that love is the way to get there? When we find our split–apart, when we find love, could it be that we also find God, that we leave behind the common clay and become divine?

It sure feels like divinity is close at hand when I'm with the people I love, because I believe that God lives in the little tiny space between people in a relationship and holds them together.

A kind of love that doesn't get much press is familial love; love between close family members. It's not erotic, but it's not altruistic, either. It's something else, something that drives you to support your siblings or your children or your parents.

LOVE STORY: New Magazines

JESSE. For a long time, I wondered if my story qualified as a love story. I think it does.

When I was going through puberty I did what most young boys do. I bought a bunch of very sleazy and much used girlie magazines from an older kid at school and kept them hidden under my mattress where I was sure, of course, that nobody would ever find them.

One day I noticed that several of the magazines were gone, but somebody had replaced them with much newer and higher quality magazines. The girls were much prettier.

I was really excited.

And really embarrassed.

Either my mother or my father or my older sister had done it, because nobody else came into our house. Nobody ever said anything or let on, and I was too scared to ask. This happened every once in awhile for a couple of years, until I left for college. Once there was a whole book about love and sex education with very explicit photographs.

To this day I don't know who tended to my magazine collection. I guess I don't want to know. I like thinking that anyone in my family might have loved me enough to understand my adolescence and not make a fuss about my normal sexuality or embarrass me.

MINISTER. The love stories we heard this morning were taken from Robert Fulghum's book, *True Love.* Fulghum is a Unitarian Universalist minister who wrote *Everything I Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten.* This is his personal credo:

I believe that imagination is stronger than knowledge,
That myth is more potent than history,
I believe that dreams are more powerful than facts,
That hope always triumphs over experience,
That laughter is the only cure for grief,
And I believe that love is stronger than death.

This story never fails to touch me. It exemplifies what love does best. It *does* lift us up where we belong. It makes us kings and queens, even gods.

LOVE STORY: Peanuts

CATHERINE. My brother and I owe our existence to peanuts. This is really my mother's story, but she's too shy to tell you.

When she graduated from high school my mother had everything going for her. She was pretty, smart, and came from a well-to-do family. But she was terminally shy, especially around men. Boys didn't like to take her out because she was so quiet.

She attended the same college her mother went to, and to please her mother, she rushed her mother's sorority. At the first rush party, she sat out of sight at one end of a room, in a comer by a table that had snacks on it. She ate a lot of peanuts out of nervousness.

She noticed a waiter, who seemed to be as shy as she was. He never said anything, but he was taking care of her. He kept her glass filled with nonalcoholic punch and he kept her peanut bowl full. From time to time their eyes met and they smiled at each other.

When the dancing started and the party got rowdy, she walked into the kitchen and out the back door to escape. As she was going down the alley, she heard someone calling, "Wait, wait, please wait." It was the waiter, running down the alley after her with a paper bag in his hands.

They stood in awkward silence, just smiling. Then he reached into the bag, pulled out a whole can of peanuts and offered them to her and said, "I only wish these were pearls." He ran back up the alley and into the sorority house.

Well, one thing led to another.

Twenty-five years later, on their silver wedding anniversary, my father—the waiter—gave Mom a sterling silver jar marked "Peanuts." She thought that was the gift and was really pleased. But there was more. When she lifted the lid, inside was a string of pearls.

No gift ever pleased her more. She wore those pearls as her only jewelry for years. When my father was killed in a traffic accident, she put the silver peanut can in his coffin with him. I've never seen her wear the pearls since. I think I know where they are, but I'm too shy to ask.

MINISTER. Love, I believe is too complex for a mere discussion. I think you should go out and practice at it until you get it right. Mary Hunter would you please extinguish our chalice? Please read with me.

EXTINGUISHING THE CHALICE

We extinguish this flame,
but not the light of its truth,
the warmth of this community,
nor the fire of our commitment.
These we carry in our hearts
and share with all the world.

MINISTER. The last love story I have for you today is about *agape*, which is a Greek word that is sometimes translated "brotherly love," or love of your fellow human. This story is about a Brahmin, a member of the highest caste in India and the untouchables he loves. His name is Narayanan Krishnan, and he is a modern day saint.

LOVE STORY: A Modern Day Saint

POSTLUDE: Put a Little Love in Your Heart

Parents, please leave now to rejoin your children and let's enjoy a time of fellowship with the best fair–trade coffee in southeastern Tennessee. And please enjoy these visual stories about love.