Journey Toward Radical love.

What a deeply meaningful and engaging theme to be exploring this year as a congregation.

When Rev. Barnaby told me this was your theme for the entire year, I was truly inspired.

The question: How do we love well and with intention? is at the heart of my sermon this morning. Our love, I believe, can be powerful, especially when it is directed with intention in our relationships with others. So, this is what I invite us to consider this morning: how do we approach our relationships with loving intention?

One of the ironies of our contemporary world that I think makes this a pressing question is that while we are connected to one another in more and more ways through social media and connected to the outside world through the internet, we are also lonelier than we’ve ever been. A 2014 National
Science Foundation study found that one in four Americans have no one with whom they can talk about their personal troubles or triumphs, and that number doubles if immediate family is not counted.¹ Between 1985 and 2004, the General Social Survey found that the number of people saying there is no one with whom they discuss important matters nearly tripled.²

I mean, don’t get me wrong, I think it’s a pretty amazing thing that each morning I can watch a short video on Instagram of my now one-year old niece learning to walk, or reconnect with old friends on Facebook that I haven’t seen in years. Yet, this overall trend of losing close relationships, a sense of fellowship with our human siblings, is troubling. We are connected to one another and have at our fingertips myriad ways to watch videos, post photos, comment on posts, say hello, read life updates...and yet, we are also becoming more distant from one another and losing relationships of intimacy, trust, and closeness.


² “Social Isolation in America: Changes in Core Discussion Networks over Two Decades,” http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/000312240607100301
Now, I don’t want to blame it all on the internet. Partly because I do think these tools at our disposal can be used to bring joy and happiness into our lives. But also because we do have agency in fostering deeper connections with those around us.

I know that it is often easy for me in my personal relationships to take connection for granted and to forget that true intimacy takes effort and intention.

In my own life, I have many wonderful connections - to members of my family, to friends near and far, to colleagues near and far, to mentors, to neighbors. My connections are many. But, it is not always the case that I really pay attention to those relationships. In the busyness of life, I can go days without really pausing to listen deeply to my spouse or even to my child even while my mind gets saturated with News Feed updates from “friends” near and far.

But, when I do pause to really be with those around me, I feel the difference. I felt this difference a couple of Fridays ago. We had just experienced as a broader community traumatic events involving an alleged armed robbery by a young man who
turned out to have grown up in Montpelier and then his fatal shooting by law enforcement on the grounds of the high school. That Friday evening a circle of people from the congregation gathered to share what was on our minds and hearts in light of those events especially as many there knew the young man or his family. We were careful to create a safe space where each person could share openly and vulnerably. It was a circle of intimate sharing and in that circle I knew that I was not alone.

These kinds of spaces in which we can be heard, seen, and known are vital to feeling and expressing radical love in our lives.

And, I suspect that it is intimacy and not connection alone that is the antidote to loneliness. It is when we are able to share of ourselves with vulnerability that we know that we are part of something bigger than our individual selves.

If we are to be counter-cultural, which as a spiritual community I think we are called to be, then we need to resist the predominant cultural forces around us that force us to rush past one another without even really knowing one
another. I grew up in Chicago and had lived mostly in large, urban areas where this is especially true. But, I have come to realize that even in our smaller communities here in Vermont, we can end up in a state of moving past one another without showing real interest in one another.

To be known - truly known for who we are, for what we fear, for what we mourn, for what we desire to be - to be truly and fully known is what we crave, what we all need.

So, in our spiritual communities, in our families, in our social circles, we need to find ways to seek and to foster not just connection but intentional closeness and intimacy with one another.

Now, I don’t believe that closeness just happens by accident. Well, okay, there may be those very rare occasions when the circumstances you find yourself in with another person or other people engenders a sense of closeness. I recently watched the movie, “The Mountain Between Us,” which is about two people that are in a plane crash and end up stranded way up in the snow-covered mountains of Utah. The pilot died in the crash, so it’s just them, and the pilot’s dog. The
extreme circumstances bring them together, and, of course, they end up falling in love. So, maybe there are exceptions. But, in the course of our everyday lives, developing close relationships with others requires intention. Whether it is with a romantic partner, a friend, a sibling, a colleague, reaching a level of closeness in which you truly feel known, requires effort and attention.

Some of you may remember a New York Times article that was featured in the Modern Love column a couple of years ago. It was one of those articles that went viral very quickly. It was called, “To Fall in Love with Anyone, Do This.”

A pretty intriguing title, isn’t it?

In it, the author, Mandy Len Catron, refers to a method developed by the psychologist, Arthur Aron, over 20 years ago, that can make even strangers fall in love. Mandy describes a conversation with someone she knew at the university where she teaches. It began with him saying, “I suspect, given a few commonalities, you could fall in love with anyone. If so, how do you choose someone?”

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remembered Aron’s study and told this acquaintance about it. A heterosexual man and woman enter the lab through separate doors. They sit face to face opposite one another. They answer a series of increasingly personal questions. And, then they stare into each other’s eyes in silence for four minutes. Six months later, two of the participants of the study were married.

“Let’s try it,” her friend said.

So, Mandy describes the evening with this acquaintance, talking late into the night taking turns asking the 36 questions that formed this study. And, then, venturing out and stopping on a bridge where they stared into one another eye’s for four minutes.

And, I don’t know about you, but staring into anyone’s eyes even for a few seconds can start to feel too vulnerable for me.

Mandy concludes her column by indulging the reader’s curiosity. Did they fall in love? Yes, they did. But, she says the
study can’t be given all the credit - it might have happened anyway.

This article got me curious. What are these 36 magical questions that can make you fall in love with a stranger? The questions come in three sets and they become progressively more personal. The first question is, “Given the choice of anyone in the world, whom would you want as a dinner guest?” Other questions include, “If you could change anything about the way you were raised, what would it be?” “What does friendship mean to you?” “How do you feel about your relationship with your mother?” “Tell your partner something that you like about them already.” and, “If you were to die this evening with no opportunity to communicate with anyone, what would you most regret not having told someone? Why haven’t you told them yet?”

Now, the original purpose of the study wasn’t actually to make strangers fall in love. The social scientists involved wanted to see how interpersonal closeness could be affected by self-disclosure. That is, how does sharing about yourself affect your feelings of closeness with someone?
What really sticks with me about this study is the questions themselves. It is through questions that people, even people who were strangers, were able to connect at a deeper level with one another.

The questions we ask one another matter. There are questions that are really just meant to fill the space of conversation, and we need those kinds of questions from time to time. “What do you think of all this cold?” “Patriots or Eagles?” These kinds of questions serve their purpose for sure.

But, we also need questions that create a different kind of doorway or opening through connection to intimacy. These aren’t questions that presume the answers, but questions that are open enough to allow us to sink in and to discover something new or perhaps re-discover something about ourselves.

In her poem, “A Gift,” Denise Levertov speaks to the power of questions that others offer us. She writes, “Just when you seem to yourself/ nothing but a flimsy web/ of questions, you are given/ the questions of others to hold/ in the emptiness of your hands.../You are given the questions of others/ as if
they were answers/ to all you ask. Yes, perhaps/ this gift is your answer.”

When we are asked a good question - a meaningful, open question, we know the gift we have received. “What are you grateful for in this moment?” “Where is joy present in your life?” “What have you done that needs forgiving?” “Who do you need to forgive?” “What is your heart calling you towards that you have been resisting?”

Asking these kinds of questions of one another and really listening to the answers takes time and it takes our intentional curiosity in one another.

Yet, in taking the time to be interested in one another, I think we can reclaim the deep sense of knowing that is so easy to lose in our rushed and media-saturated lives.

I say all this also knowing that not all the relationships we put our efforts into will flourish. Loving intention will not make every relationship a success or strengthen the bonds of fellowship with your neighbor. But, our intentions still matter.
So, I challenge you to do this in your own lives and even here in your community. You don’t necessarily have to run home and print off a copy of the 36 questions. But, think about ways you can approach your relationships with more intentionally radical love. Perhaps pick one relationship or one area of your life to be more intentional - to not just brush by those around you but to find ways to be in conversation that allows for vulnerability and closeness to emerge. To let yourself be known and to know someone else.

In this fragmented and divided world, we must find our way back to one another again. May we choose to share our radical love with one another so that we might know ourselves part of a wide community of belonging and care.

So may it be.