

When I first started contemplating this sermon, I thought I was going to focus on aging and the various stages we go through as we walk the path of life. My wife, Katie, and I have experienced some rather significant life changes as of late; losing her mother in a car accident, my mother getting older and beginning to have health issues, and the addition of our first child, Felix, to our world last May. As I would discuss my ideas with others, I began noticing that nearly all of the conversations seemed to revolve around love, and how many of the milestones I was interested in were also accompanied by a transformation in the way I thought about love at the time.

Among these changes, one of the most significant and life-altering shifts occurred when Katie and I walked through the doors of the UUFCM in February of 2017. We'd both successfully avoided the constraints of organized religion for nearly two decades, but found ourselves lost, hurting, and in need of community. The devastation of losing Katie's mom, dealing with my own mother's failing health, our seemingly unending failure to start a family, and the darkness of our ongoing political nightmare brought everything to a head. Had you asked me three years ago if I'd ever regularly attend a Sunday service, I likely would have laughed. Had you asked me if I'd ever write a sermon, I would have had you committed on the spot.

Nevertheless, the welcome we received when we no more than crossed the threshold here changed my life. There was genuine love in the eyes of everyone I met. Warm welcomes, smiles, conversation, concerns – it was all there. It was all here. A place to let my guard down. A place to be vulnerable. A place to be worried. A place to comfort and be comforted. A place to be human.

I was five years old when I realized what love is. It was August 25th, my brother's seventh Birthday, and we were having a party with all four of our close relatives attending – my family is pretty small. My parents always made a big deal out of birthdays. It was important to them that my brother and I each had a special day that celebrated our uniqueness and our place in the world.

One of the highlights of birthdays was the Birthday Parade. My brother had gotten a toy drum the previous year for his birthday, and inside was a whole ensemble's worth of tiny instruments. Crash cymbals, kazoos, a five-note xylophone, and a tambourine that sounded more like a set of keys than it did a tambourine. We had a birthday parade record that we'd put on the Fischer Price turntable, we'd line up, distribute the instruments, and the Birthday Boy would lead the way as we marched our way around the house; inside, outside, wherever he wanted to go.

Naturally, my brother and I both wanted to play the drum, but the Birthday Boy got first choice. As a good five-year-old, I got upset, lost my mind, and refused to participate. Mom explained why Tristan got to choose first and connected me to the first Rolling Stones reference in my life: You Can't Always Get What You Want. The parade continued on schedule, and after two passes through the living room I started to feel left out, so I grabbed the tambourine (that no one wanted) and took up the rear. Grandma patted me on the head and gave me her cymbals. It felt nice to be included but felt even nicer to get rid of that awful tambourine. At the end of the record the parade stopped, and I had my first realization of what love was. Tristan wanted to do a second round of music but took off the drum and handed it to me. It's the small things that often mean the most.

Mom still has a picture of that moment hanging on the refrigerator at home.

I was 12 years old when I realized what love is. My parents had planned a week-long summer vacation to visit some close friends from their college days. The friends lived in Maine, and we were making the never-ending drive from Michigan to visit. Along the way, we stopped in Niagara Falls, as it was important to my parents that my brother and I get to experience the natural beauty and grandness of the waterfalls.

It was well past dinnertime when we rolled into town, so Dad parked us as close as he could, and we hightailed it to the river's edge. The roar of the falls plus the unbelievably fast-moving water at the top both amazed and terrified me. Where did all that water come from? Where was it headed? What would happen if you dipped your hand in? It sure seemed like the power of the blazing-fast current would reach out and pull you right over the edge.

Though it was summer, it was late enough that sunlight was not on our side. This had been a scheduled stop, but with two kids in the car, the drive had taken longer than expected. The colored lights that illuminate the falls were already starting to come on. We were pleased to have seen the water while the foam was still white, but among the mist of the falls, there was a definite cloud of disappointment that we hadn't seen them in their ultimate glory. We made our way back to the car, and started the search for a cheap, late dinner.

Mom found a Denny's nearby in the tour book she'd gotten from the local library, so we headed over there and made our way inside to eat. We sat by the window and looked out as the faintly-colored mist rose above the falls. A bit off to the right was a tall mast of lights reaching up into the sky. "What's that?" I asked. Dad pulled out the tour book and explained that it was called the Skylon Tower, and that it was a giant observation deck that allowed you to see the Falls from above, and clear across Canada to Buffalo, New York. I was instantly transfixed.

"Can we go up it?" I begged, knowing that it wasn't in the plans, and more importantly, most likely outside of the budget. It was already late. We still had to eat dinner. We needed to find a motel. Dad had been driving all day. More reasons stood in my way than my young brain could have ever possibly imagined. We finished our meals and headed to the nearest EconoLodge. Mom checked us in, and Dad unloaded the car. Naturally, the pool had closed at 9:00, so Tristan and I took up our spots at the end of the bed and turned on the TV.

"Let's go for a ride", Dad said, before we'd even had a chance to find something entertaining. Darkness had fully set in, and he wanted us to see the Falls illuminated under the colored lights. It wouldn't be the same as day, but our early departure the following morning didn't leave time for a daylight trip back to the Falls.

Once in the car, Dad drove, and drove, and drove in circles, mumbling under his breath as he tried to make sense of the dark, foreign streets before us. "How hard can it be?", I remember thinking. We'd just come from here a couple hours ago. It was then that I realized we weren't where we'd been. Peering out the windows, I saw a large parking lot with a tall concrete structure at the center. Sure enough, they'd secretly talked it over and found a way to make it work financially. Dad would stay in the car, while Mom took the kids up to the top of the World.

It was just a few years later, when I was 15, that realized what love is. My 9th grade English class had spent a whole semester studying the holocaust, and the conclusion of the class included a week-long field trip to visit the United States Holocaust Museum in Washington D.C. There was an 12-hour bus ride we'd have to endure, but the promise of a week off from school made up for any such misery. My best friend, Steve, and I

planned out plenty of games and activities to keep us occupied on the mind-numbing cross-country journey. There were extra seats available on the bus, so a few non-classmates, and even a couple community members came along as a way to help keep the cost per student lower. My mom went as a chaperone, both Steve's Mom and Grandma went as chaperones, and even his older sister, Katie, went along, as she'd opted to not take the class when she was our age.

On the morning of our departure we boarded the bus at school, unpacked our backpacks, and set sail on the giant Mitchell charter bus that would be our home for the next twelve hours. We started with the basics, tic-tac-toe, a couple battery-operated video games, and a word game that we quickly modified the rules to once the actual version had run its course. Time was flying by! And then we hit Ohio. Turns out, we weren't passing as much time as we'd thought. We barely made it out of Michigan before running out of content – and with only nine more hours to go!

A group at the back of the bus decided to play a board game which piqued Steve's interest. I, too, was bored with our word game, but was also always content to just sit and look out the window. He decided to swap seats with his sister, which I didn't mind. She was in my brother's grade, and the long-term friendship I'd had with Steve meant that Katie and I were familiar enough with each other that I knew we'd get along just fine. Boy, did we ever.

What started as basic small talk quickly escalated to recent life events and much more serious topics. Every sentence drew me further in to the mind of the girl sitting next to me. As the overly-enthusiastic goofball of the group, I was always the jokester, always the entertainer. I never knew when to shut up, and for the first time in my life, I genuinely wanted to listen to someone else talk. We were young, but the conversation was amazing. We laughed, she cried, and we shared things we'd never shared with others. It was real, and I could feel something growing inside me.

After 12 hours on the bus, we'd developed something that I'd never felt before. Every question had an answer, and every moment of silence felt perfect. Her smile made me smile, and her words made me dream. When we arrived at the hotel in Washington that night, we weren't ready to part. 12 hours hadn't been enough, and we both wanted more. With Steve in my room, and both of our Mom's as chaperones, we ended up in adjacent rooms, and convinced them to let us sit in the hall and talk until we were exhausted. Even that wasn't enough. After parting, I laid awake in bed most of that night, thinking about the girl on the other side of the wall and what we would talk about the next day. I knew that night that she was the one that would complete my world. Twenty years later, I can tell you with complete certainty, I've never been so right about something.

I was 30 when I realized what love is. My Dad, who had worked his entire life to support his family, finally retired to settle down and enjoy his sunset years. It wasn't really in the cards, financially, but my parents had found a way to make it work. Dad bought a small pop-up camper to pull behind the car, and he had plans to put it to good use. Mom had been dealing with some pretty tough rheumatoid arthritis in recent years, but they made adjustments and tried their best to find their new normal.

The doctors put Mom on some pretty intense drugs, but they only seemed to make things different, not better. Every time we'd visit, she seemed more and more distant – less of the person she used to be. The pain persisted, and as a result, she essentially stopped walking altogether. Life became a path between the

bedroom, the kitchen, and the bathroom – never more than 20 steps apart. Her mind seemed to be slipping away under the constant fog of medication she was enduring. She moved even less. She'd sleep until noon and spend the duration of her "day" sitting at the kitchen table, watching the TV that sits by the wall. As her unused muscles continued to deteriorate, soon the incontinence followed. The signals were there, but the pain and struggle of mobility, plus the fog of medication countered and conquered those signals.

Over the last five years, Dad has transitioned from Employee of the Month to Husband of the Year. He cooks, he cleans, he shops, and he does LOTS of laundry. He also deals with a rare blood disease of his own, which means he also chauffeurs both of them back and forth between seemingly daily appointments with specialists and doctors. You can tell he's exhausted, but he never stops. For better or worse, in two weeks they'll celebrate their 49th wedding anniversary.

I was 34 when I realized what love is. After nine years of marriage, and nearly seven years of failed attempts, we finally had the opportunity to start a family. The road was brutally long but immediately disappeared from my rearview mirror the moment I laid eyes on Felix. The past no longer mattered. Our future was right there in front of us. The surgeon raised him up over the sheet in front of me, and I got to tell Katie that we had a beautiful baby boy. An immediate sense of wonder, joy, and responsibility landed in my heart. No fear, no questions, just the purest love this world has to offer.

We've already experienced so many amazing things, and I know we're just getting started. The first time he really looked at me. The first time he laughed. The first time he sang. The first time he "played" my drum set, not by banging away, but instead sampling each drum and cymbal individually, clearly noticing the differences between each instrument. Even last week, when he manipulated me for the first time. We'd done our normal nighttime routine: book, bath, bottle, bed, except the moment I laid him down and walked out of his room, he started screaming and crying bloody murder. We let him fuss for a few minutes, but he just wasn't doing the self-soothing that he'd normally do. After ten minutes I decided it had been long enough and went in to check on him. The second I cracked the door, all the commotion stopped, and the little stinker started laughing. We did, too.

Felix turned one last month, and this newest iteration of love has only intensified with time. Each new first for him brings a new sense of joy and pride as we watch him explore. I've found a better version of myself in his world. More peace, more understanding, more empathy, and most importantly, more love. I'm so happy to have the opportunity to share him with the community here at UUFCM, and to experience the joy he brings to others. Each week I see the love that's shared with him, and I will be forever grateful for the love that was shared with us when we walked through these doors two years ago.