

**Love Conquers Death – Harry Potter’s Promise – The Rev. Suzelle Lynch,
UU Church West, Brookfield, WI**

FIRST READING “Gods in Everyman,” Jean Shinoda Bolen (*pp. 304-5.*)

SECOND READING – from First Corinthians 13 in the Christian scriptures – from New Revised Standard Version)

If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or 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 do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. ...

Love never ends.

SERMON -- Love Conquers Death – Harry Potter’s Promise

Magic. Imagine a world in which with a flick of a wand and a few words in Latin, things float in thin air. Or a toad turns into a canary. Or the bones in someone’s arm turn to jello.

Magic. Imagine a world in which with a broom, the proper attitude, and a good strong kick up off the ground, you’d launch into the air and fly freely, zooming all around....

Magic! Imagine a world where you might gather some herbs and dried lizard tongues and add them with newt’s tears and other interesting ingredients to a cauldron and boil -- and voila! You’ve got a potion you can use to make someone vomit up slugs, or sleep standing up, or transform into something completely different.

Magic. Imagine a world populated by creatures and beings strange and wonderful like house-elves and dragons, goblins and centaurs, werewolves and hippogriffs, merfolk and thestrals – winged horses visible only to those who have known the death of a loved one....

Do you believe in magic?

I do.

But not necessarily the kind of magic present in the world of Harry Potter, the world of witches and wizards and the magical-training school Harry attends in the seven best-selling books by J. K. Rowling. No, I don't believe in the kind of magic that would use charms or spells, potions or incantations to exert supernatural power over natural phenomena. But I do believe in human magic, something I'll say a little more about later.

But right now, let us enter the world of Harry Potter, boy wizard, chief protagonist of seven stories which have sold 325 million copies worldwide. Stories translated into 64 languages. Stories which have made their author the first person ever to become a billionaire from writing books.

When presented with such a huge cultural phenomenon, it's tempting to either jump on board and ride the wave or to stand back and critique it to death. We won't do either of those things today. Instead, I hope you will journey with me into the stories, and perhaps find what it is about them that resonates so resoundingly with so many people. Along the way, I think we also might see how they intersect with our own UU values.

(Ask who has read the books or seen the movies...)

When we first meet Harry Potter, he is a ten-year-old boy, an orphan, a skinny kid with wild black hair and glasses, and he's living with the Dursleys, his mother's sister's family, who fear and hate wizards and who treat him with disdain and disgust. He's forced to live in a closet under the stairs, and allowed to eat only the food that no one else wants, and scanty amounts at that. He's tormented by his overfed and coddled cousin, Dudley. Harry's unwelcome, unwanted, and unloved – a kid with little hope, and no power in his family. But he does seem to have another kind of power: strange things sometimes happen around Harry...

When Harry turns eleven, though, everything changes.

That's when he learns the astonishing fact that he is not an ordinary boy, but is, instead, a wizard – which explains a few of those strange happenings. And it's not only that he's got magical powers, but he's also been invited to enter the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry to be trained to use his gifts. And, all at the same time, he also learns that he's the only wizard, the only person who has ever survived a death curse delivered by the dreaded Lord Voldemort, the most powerful and evil of all wizards throughout time. (Voldemort is so evil that most wizards and witches won't even use his name, calling him "you know who" instead.) The story tells us that when Harry was just a baby, Voldemort attacked his family – aiming a killing curse at Harry and his father – but Harry's mother stood firm in the path of the curse. Her love, her self-sacrifice, not only saved Harry's life, but also deflected the evil one's power back at him, rendering him bodiless and nearly impotent. At fifteen months old, Harry was left with an unusual scar on his forehead, its lightning-bolt-shape forever marking him as "the boy who lived," and was sent to live with the Dursleys.

But now Harry is on his way to Hogwarts. In Chapter 6 of the first book, we read, “The narrow path had opened suddenly on to the edge of a great black lake. Perched atop a high mountain on the other side, its windows sparkling in the starry sky, was a vast castle with many turrets and towers.” That vast castle was the place where Harry, free at last, would find help and home, friends and mentors.

The most important of those mentors would always be Professor Albus Dumbledore, Hogwarts headmaster, described thusly, “He was tall, thin, and very old, judging by the silver of his hair and beard, which were both long enough to tuck into his belt. He was wearing long robes, a purple cloak that swept the ground, and high-heeled, buckled boots. His blue eyes were light, bright, and sparkling behind half-moon spectacles and his nose was very long and crooked, as though it had been broken at least twice.” (from “HP and the Sorcerer’s Stone.”) Dumbledore is to Voldemort as sweet is to sour, as light is to heavy, as day is to night. He’s the paragon of good, the leader of the wizards who are on the side of inclusivity, tolerance and justice, every bit as much as Voldemort and his followers – who are known as the “Death Eaters,” are on the side of xenophobia, exclusivity, and the acquisition of power to be used not to serve, but to oppress.

At Hogwarts, Harry also finds friends, most notably Ron Weasley, a gangly red-headed boy from a well-known but poor and non-conformist wizarding family, and Hermione Grainger, an outspoken young woman who will prove herself the smartest student in the pack, driven, perhaps, by the fact that she is the first and only witch in her family – her parents are what the community of witches and wizards call “muggles,” meaning non-magically talented humans. These three young people form an unbreakable bond through dozens of adventures – some fun, but most of them dangerous and dark and full of purpose.

Indeed, if there was one thing that surprised me about the Harry Potter books, it was how very dark they are. The forces of evil are compellingly portrayed. But I suppose that’s not abnormal for books that concern themselves, in the main, with the struggle between good and evil. That theme threads most noticeably through the series, and has a great deal to do with the appeal of the books.

Why? Well, we human beings, throughout time, have sought to understand good and evil. We’ve longed for what the Harry Potter books provide, the repeated victory of the good – no matter how vicious the opposing evil forces may be. This deep human yearning has also been expressed in religious traditions across cultures, for example, in the story of Jesus as the Christ, who saved the world from sin. It’s in the longing for a Second Coming of Christ, and in the desire for the Messiah to come and scour the world of evil. It’s in the powerful Hindu sacred story, the Ramayana, which tells of Rama, the great and good hero, rescuing his wife Sita from the demon Ravana. Rama’s journey and struggles are said to show how to live the best and most moral life, and the very hearing of

this story is said to have a good and powerful effect, freeing those who listen from sin and evil.

The theme of good versus evil is all over popular culture as well. Remember Star Wars? The many incarnations of Star Trek? How about the West Wing TV series, or the one called "24"? I can't even count the number of superhero movies for kids that have come out over the past few years. And, of course, good vs. evil is a theme popularly referred to by politicians as well, particularly in times, like ours, when our nation is at war.

Why does this theme draw us? Theologians have never been able to answer the challenge posed by the claim that God is both omnipotent and completely benevolent – the question of where, in such a system, evil comes from. It is our human nature to invest our souls in the question of good and evil, in the longing to see the good triumph, for consciously or unconsciously, we live not only with the presence of evil in the world, but also with the reality of our own potential for evil. As Unitarian Universalists, we know this as the flip side of the inherent worth and dignity of each and every person. As my colleague the Rev. Richard Gilbert once wrote, "The line between good and evil runs right through the middle of each human heart." ("The Prophetic Imperative," p. 73.) We cannot work for, nor achieve a better world by ignoring evil.

Harry Potter's colorful and imaginative world invites us – as all the world's best myths and stories mean to do -- to engage these questions and draw parallels to our own experiences. My friend, the Rev. Bill Sasso, says that this is especially easy for young people (and perhaps especially young men) because they can identify with the character, "Harry and his friends experience the same trials and tribulations that every teenager faces," he writes. "The transition to a new school, making new friends and being hassled by non-friends,... trying to get a handle on (your) developing sexuality, trying to figure out who (you) might become as an ... adult." (From "The Theology of Harry Potter," by the Rev. William Sasso.)

But the Harry Potter series is more than a simple good vs. evil story. And it's not intended, as some commentators have asserted, to be an allegory for the Christian story of fall and redemption. The stories give us complex characters – not always clearly definable as being on the good side or the evil side. And they ask us to understand that knowing what is good and what is evil requires a great deal of discernment, and is, perhaps, a question never entirely settled. For as we know, life is, if nothing else, filled with ambiguity. And yet to live, we must take action and make choices anyway.

Thus, our choices and how they shape us is another powerful theme in these stories. In the second book Harry goes to Professor Dumbledore after he has nearly been killed by Voldemort. Surviving this evil attack, Harry finds that he needs to ask a terrible question – a question not about Voldemort, but about himself. It's a question that goes back to his first days at the school, when he first experienced the "Sorting Hat," the wise and magical chapeau that

determines into which of the four Hogwarts school “houses” each new student will be placed.

For those of you unfamiliar with the books, those four houses include Hufflepuff: the house for those students who are loyal and hardworking; and Ravenclaw: for those who are more focused and intellectual. Gryffindor is the house of heroes – the home of those brave at heart, and full of daring; and Slytherin is the house of ambition, the house of pure-blood wizards, those who would seek greatness for good or ill. Each house takes its name from its founding witch or wizard.

So here’s the scene: Harry has discovered that he has many qualities in common with Voldemort, who was a member of Slytherin house during his Hogwarts days. “So I should be in Slytherin,” Harry said, looking desperately into Dumbledore’s face. “The Sorting Hat could see Slytherin’s power in me, and it...”

“Put you in Gryffindor,” said Dumbledore calmly. “Listen to me, Harry. You happen to have many qualities Salazar Slytherin prized in his hand-picked students. Resourcefulness determination... a certain disregard for rules,” he added, his moustache quivering ... “Yet the Sorting Hat placed you in Gryffindor. You know why that was. Think.”

“It only put me in Gryffindor,” said Harry in a defeated voice, “Because I asked not to go in Slytherin. . . .”

“Exactly,” said Dumbledore, beaming... . “Which makes you very different from Voldemort, (who wanted more than anything to be in Slytherin). It is our choices, Harry, that show what we truly are, far more than our abilities.”

Harry is stunned by this message, as any early-adolescent might be. Our choices show us what we truly are, far more than our abilities. This is such an important message for children, and one that resonates for people of all ages as well (perhaps especially for those of us facing midlife’s set of identity crises). Harry Potter’s journey through the seven books is the story of his growing understanding of the deep reality of evil – evil that can be and must be fought -- but also of his growing understanding of the power of choice and of the basis from which he must make his choices. And that basis, that place from which Harry, and we, must choose, is love.

For me, this is the deep message of these books: that love, in all its many forms, is our most powerful tool in all of life, but especially against evil. For love binds us together and lends us each other’s strength and hope and courage, while evil seeks to separate us – to render us lonely, isolated, vulnerable, fragile and despairing – thus making us easier to kill or pervert. For those are evil’s aims – to take advantage of us, convert us – to add our power to its own, for its own purposes -- to or kill us off if we resist. Harry Potter’s story is about the critical importance of choosing from the place of love, not power.

Harry Potter learns, towards the end of the first book, that he once had an amazing role model in terms of choosing from love. It comes to light, as so many things do, in a conversation with Professor Dumbledore. Harry has again survived a meeting with Lord Voldemort, and he asks Dumbledore why it was that Voldemort's evil was somehow prevented from harming him. Why was he protected? Dumbledore says, "Your mother died to save you. If there is one thing Voldemort cannot understand, it is love. He didn't realize that love as powerful as your mother's for you leaves its own mark. Not a scar, no visible sign . . . (but) to have been loved so deeply, even though the person who loved us is gone, will give us some protection forever. It is in your very skin. That evil person, full of hatred, greed, and ambition, could not touch you It was agony to touch a person marked by something so good." (From, "HP and The Sorcerer's Stone," chapter 17)

Harry also leans on and learns from the love of his friends. Over and over again, his friends, especially Ron and Hermione, but many others as well, stand by him, even when he feels he should go it alone and save them from danger. He's also blessed by the love of his godfather, Sirius Black, and by The Order of the Phoenix – the troupe of good wizards Dumbledore calls to action as Voldemort regains and strengthens his evil power and his army of Death Eaters as the books roll along. Harry is blessed by romantic love as well – which is, if I remember correctly back to my own teenage years, a form of love both passionate and empowering.

And so Harry chooses from love, time and again. How? One example comes in the fourth book, when he somehow becomes involved in the Triwizard Tournament, a three-part competition between Hogwarts School and the two other magical-training schools. Harry gets inside information for the first task, information another contestant does not have – and so, in the interest of fairness, he tells him. In the second task, he takes precious time to rescue some people in danger, and thus loses his winning edge. Choosing from love means operating from our deepest values, not from our fears or our inadequacies. It means setting self-interest aside for just one precious moment, and then doing it again, and again....

Harry's far from an angel, of course. Remember what Dumbledore said about his disrespect for the rules? He's not a knee-jerk, do-gooder. Like any of us he has moments when he strikes out in anger and feels a burning desire to hurt those whom he considers his enemies. But time after time he chooses to be kind, to be fair, to be caring; he's even compassionate with Moaning Myrtle, the extremely annoying ghost of a student killed many years earlier by Slytherin himself.

In our first reading, Jean Shinoda Bolen reminds us that part of the condition of being human is that like Harry Potter, none of us were born into a world of complete, unconditional love. And thus, to one degree or another, all of us have settled for power instead. The quest to acquire power, which Harry Potter's

stories would have us regard as a temptation to slide into evil, rules each of us to some degree. It's inevitable.

But what the stories and Shinoda Bolen also remind us is that we have a choice about whether we remain in the sway of the quest for power. Our lives present us, every day, with opportunities to decide from which basis we will make our choices: love, or power.

In our second reading the words from the Bible's 1st Corinthians 13 speak to us of love, telling us that without it, all speaking, all knowledge and faith and prophecy, all sacrifice are nothing. Only with love are our words and actions effective.

Except that we know that this isn't true. I certainly know that words I've spoken in anger have had far more impact than some I've uttered with love. Many of us have felt within ourselves that the urge to destroy is often far more powerful than the desire to build up. And it's impossible in our day and age to not know that one nuclear warhead can change the world far more comprehensively than can a plethora of loving thoughts and acts.

So what is the writer of 1st Corinthians talking about when he says, "Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things"? I used to think this passage made reference to an ideal world, the world of weddings and turtledoves and perfect love. But these days it reminds me more often that here, in our congregation, we operate from the abiding belief that love is the foundation for community. As a community, we are dedicated to increasing the odds that love can win in our world. And I don't mean a saccharine, goopy, everybody-has-to-love-everybody-all-the-time kind of love. No. Not a love that can't countenance some healthy disagreement. But instead, a kind of love that recognizes interdependence as the ground of our being. A love that recognizes that we need each other, we depend on each other for our very existence.

Professor Dumbledore touches on this when he says, "...in the light of Voldemort's return," he said, "we are only as strong as we are united, as weak as we are divided. Lord Voldemort's gift for spreading discord and enmity is very great. We can fight it only by showing an equally strong bond of friendship and trust. Differences of habit and language are nothing at all if our aims are identical and our hearts are open."

The Harry Potter book series is finished, and I will not give away the ending of the seventh book, but I will tell you that there is nothing in it that would defy what I have said to you this day: that we must, despite all odds of birth and life path and circumstance, we must keep our hearts open, bond in friendship and trust, and cultivate love as the basis from which all our choices are made. For love, in all its many forms, is the most powerful force we have against evil; it is the most powerful energy in all of life.

Or, as I have become fond of saying over the past few years: Love is the human form of magic.

May we use it well.

Amen.