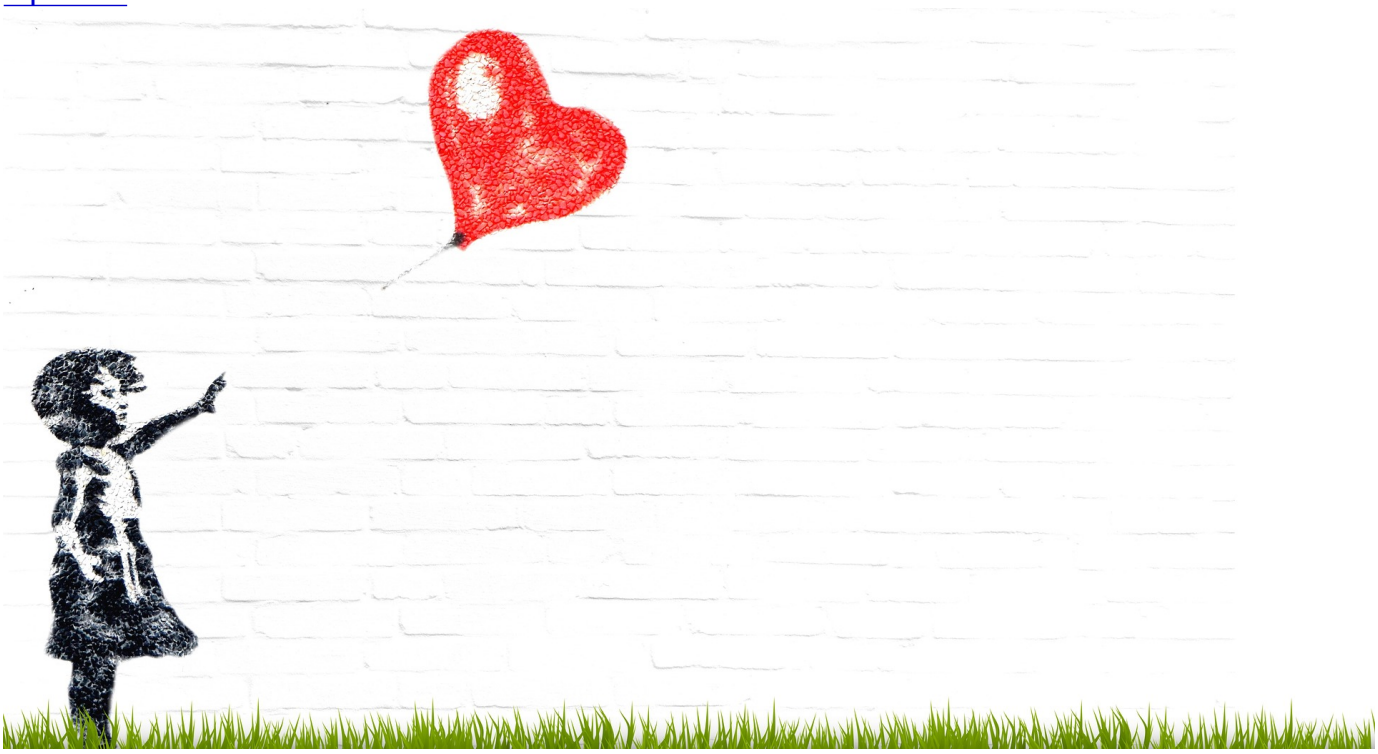
Opinion



(Pixabay/Pixel2013)



by Mariam Williams

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March 28, 2019

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I've been thinking a lot lately about love.

One of my aunts passed earlier this month. She died quite literally surrounded by love, wrapped in the arms of her eldest daughter, who was lying next to her in her hospital bed when she took her last breath.

I've been mourning both my aunt and a relationship that ended a couple days before Christmas. It began in the summer and had passion that fit the season and an emotional intimacy that developed quickly, carried us through the fall, and that would, I thought, be there in the form of almost daily conversations I wish I still had with him, now that my aunt's homegoing service is over and I have returned to life and work hundreds of miles away from the rest of my family.

I have wondered if the high-level emotional connection I felt or even the relationship's potential was my imagination, if it was something similar to a phantom pregnancy, a desire to love and be loved so strong that it activated symptoms of a relationship that was never there.

I have returned off and on to considering the authenticity of love within church and faith-based spaces. Prior to the visitation, I had never been to my aunt's church, but I met her pastor, his wife and one church member at the hospital the day before she died. The pastor had been out of town and had driven through the night to make sure he, like me, the niece who lives far away but who called her "Mama Mary" growing up, could arrive in time to offer final comforts to her and to one another.

Members from my aunt's church were calling while we were in the hospital. As I took the job of pulling contacts from her phone, something her daughters weren't ready to do, I saw how many of them had sent her text messages full of their love and prayers. In remarks at the funeral and in moments at the repast — when they served us food, cleaned up spills my aunt's great-grandchildren had made, when I tiptoed to the food line for seconds and the members in line urged me ahead of them — I could hear and see and feel they loved her.

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In my head, I've compared the love I experienced in my aunt's passing to a love that is missing or can perhaps be just diminished or hard to find in the church. I read recently Lysaundra Campbell's "Letter from the Angry Black Woman in Your Pew." In it, she discusses "the neglect and perpetuation of racialized sexism, or misogynoir,"

in predominantly white, conservative Evangelical spaces.

She writes, "When Christian traditions have turned their backs, afflicted violence, or remained silent on pervasive issues affecting black women and girls, I start to question their love." Campbell's question, "What if you were drawn to seeking justice for black women and girls, not because you're married to one or raising one, but simply because we are God's image bearers?" led me to a question of my own: How realistic is it to expect people to love those who are entirely unlike themselves?

I see the capacity for such love demonstrated often in eros love. Say, "I've never met anyone like you before," to someone you like or find attractive, and see if more feelings don't bloom. But let's say that loving someone also means believing them, speaking up for them, seeking justice for them, or recognizing and attempting to understand their intersectional identities and the hurt that has been done to them because of the bodies they inhabit. If that is love, then how easy is it to fall in familial and spiritual love with someone whose experiences are so different from your own that you've never even thought about their experiences?

How realistic is it to expect people to love someone entirely unlike themselves? What would happen if the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, filled with iconic images that have shaped human perception of God's image for hundreds of years, had been painted to show that every human being bears God's image? Although artists painted the people around them, the possibility isn't entirely unrealistic. By the early 1500s, when Michelangelo began his work, we knew the world was round. Well before that, the apostle Paul had met an Ethiopian, and Moses had married a Cushite woman after having been raised by Egyptians.

Thinking about the extent to which appearance impacts human capacity to love is discomfiting at best, but for centuries, it has dictated who surrounds us at home, work, church and leisure settings and people's roles in those spaces. I believe our capacity to love expands not with colorblindness or neutrality about another person's gender representation, but with our capacity to listen. We won't hear shared experiences, but we will surely hear shared pain and hopefully want to agree to heal it.

[Mariam Williams is a Kentucky writer living in Philadelphia. She holds a Master of Fine Arts degree in creative writing and certificate in public history from Rutgers University-Camden. She is a contributor to the anthology Faithfully Feminist and blogs at MariamWilliams.com. Follow her on Twitter @missmariamw.]

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