

Haydenville Congregational Church

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Matthew 22:34-46

“Longing and Love”

*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts
be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord Our Strength and Our Redeemer. Amen.*

Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, who lived from 1900 to 1944, was a French writer, poet and pioneering aviator. He is best remembered for his novella *The Little Prince* and for his lyrical writings about aviation, including *Night Flight* and *Wind, Sand and Stars*. Antoine de Saint-Exupery is often quoted because he wrote some remarkable one-line nuggets of wisdom and brilliance.

Here is one of his lines: A rock pile ceases to be a rock pile the moment a single man contemplates it, bearing within him the image of a cathedral.

Here's another gem: It is only with the heart that one can see rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eye.

And here is another: A single event can awaken within us a stranger totally unknown to us. To live is to be slowly born.

This sensitive writer, daring adventurer, and lay philosopher had a profound understanding of the human condition and his writing reveals the depth of his perceptions about life and its challenges.

One of my favorite lines by Saint-Exupery has relevance to us as we consider today's reading from the Gospel of Matthew. Listen...

“If you want to build a ship, don't drum up people together to collect wood and don't assign them tasks and work, but rather teach them to long for the endless immensity of the sea.”

...teach them to long for the endless immensity of the sea...

In today's Scripture reading, I believe Jesus wants to teach us to long for the endless immensity of love...our love for God and our love for each other. I think Jesus wants to instill in us an almost insatiable longing for love.

Jesus knows that if we experience a longing for love—love for God and love for neighbor—we will never give up the quest to fulfill that longing, and we will never stray far from God. If we long for God and love God with all our heart, soul and mind, we will inevitably live a deeply spiritual life. That is what Jesus wants for us: to be almost consumed by loving and longing—to love God and neighbor with an unqualified, unconditional, ever-deepening love.

Let's pause and put today's reading in the context of Jesus' life—exactly when and where is this story happening, and what exchanges with the Pharisees and Sadducees have preceded this particular story?

A lawyer, a Pharisee, comes to Jesus with a question—a difficult question, maybe an unanswerable question. Jesus has already silenced the Sadducees. And the Pharisees and the Sadducees were rival parties in first-century Jerusalem. The lawyer is trying to outwit—to stump—Jesus, to show his opposition to Jesus and to prove that the Pharisees are smarter than the Sadducees.

The lawyer asks Jesus a trick question. Now prior to this dialogue, Jesus has been engaged in increasingly hostile exchanges with religious leaders. Jesus has already shared a prophetic attack on the temple administration (Mt 21:12-17), he has been asked about the legitimacy of paying taxes to Caesar (Mt 22:15-22) and he has been questioned about the resurrection (Mt 22:23-33). These exchanges have been more aggressive and adversarial than any other dialogue in the Gospels. Jesus has called the Pharisees “hypocrites” and confounded them with his superior Biblical knowledge and irrefutable logic.

The antagonistic confrontations have been escalating and now Jesus is asked another in the series of trick questions: “Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” To understand Jesus' answer, we must remember WHERE he is and WHEN this is happening. Jesus has entered Jerusalem, it is the Monday of what we call Holy Week, the final week of his life. Jesus is now living and teaching in the profound tension between Sunday's acclamation (what we call Palm Sunday) and Friday's execution (what we call Good Friday). Jesus is in Jerusalem, in the last days of his life. He has no time for traps or games. He hears the lawyer's question and answers in good faith.

When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, ³⁵and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him.

³⁶‘Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?’ ³⁷He said to him, ‘*You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.*’ ³⁸This is the greatest and first commandment.
³⁹And a second is like it: *“You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”*
⁴⁰*On these commandments hang all the law and the prophets.’*

As you hear those words, remember that Jesus was a totally unexpected paradox— he was both an Orthodox Jew AND a profound threat to the religious establishment of his time. Early in his ministry, Jesus said that his purpose was not “to abolish, but to fulfill” the law. Jesus was an Orthodox Jew and yet he stood OUTSIDE the faith critiquing it, expanding it, reinterpreting it...he was both the fulfillment of Jewish law and a serious threat to the faith.

When the lawyer asked, “Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” he is imagining that Jesus will take one of the Ten Commandments from the Torah and elevate it above the others, or Jesus will take one of the other 613 laws in the Torah and elevate it above all the others. But either of those responses would be blasphemy!

Jesus does not fall for the trap, but he does quote the Torah, revealing his faithfulness to Judaism. He says:

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.”

In fact, Jesus quotes the Shema: Judaism’s most fundamental, ancient, and widely recited biblical passage (Deuteronomy 6:5).

The Shema is THE standard prayer that all pious Jews recite daily.

And then Jesus adds to the Shema a second citation from the Torah:

“You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Leviticus 19:18).

Jesus is at the end of his life. This is Monday; he will die on Friday. What he does is link together two passages from Scripture that provide a summary of his entire ministry. In quoting the Shema, Jesus is saying: the aim of the law is to orient one’s entire life toward God.

There is a story about the famous Rabbi Hillel and how he was once asked a trick question. The story goes: a man challenged Hillel, “Rabbi, teach me the whole of the Torah while standing on one foot.”

Hillel replied: “That which is hateful to you, do not do to others. This is the whole Torah. The rest is commentary.”

When Jesus is asked “Teacher, which commandment is the greatest?” Essentially he replies: “Love God and love each other. The rest is commentary.”

In our passage for today, Jesus does what Jesus does so well. He confounds his listeners with his direct, clear and simple answer. He leaves listeners speechless with his minimalist, uncomplicated, straightforward response to a devious question.

The greatest commandment of all? We are called to love God with all our heart, soul and mind. And love our neighbor as ourselves.

So simple and so difficult.

Antoine de Saint-Exupery said, “If you want to build a ship, don't drum up people together to collect wood and don't assign them tasks and work, but rather teach them to long for the endless immensity of the sea.”

Jesus wanted to build disciples. And so he did not drum up people together to build institutions and make boards and committees.

He said: love God and love each other.

And I believe it is because Jesus recognized, as the Quakers always say, that we are born with the spark of God within us and that spark of the divine creates an inner longing in our very souls, an inner longing for the immensity of God's love. Jesus knew we are born hard-wired to seek God, to hunger for God, to love God, to want to be loved by God and to love one another. We are born with a spark of the divine within us which creates a restless seeking, an inner desire, a longing to know and love God. Jesus wanted to fan that spark, build it into a flame, and keep that longing burning in our hearts.

We are born with a longing to connect deeply with God—to love God, to feel God's love, and to love our neighbor. And Jesus knew that if he could blow on that ember and keep that longing alive, we would commit ourselves to walking a spiritual path throughout our lives.

Jesus knew what he was doing. He gave us a simple but difficult goal to aim for throughout our lives. All those laws in the Torah? Sure those matter. Aim to follow those. But the MOST important commandment? A longing for love...a longing to love God with all your heart, soul and mind, a longing to love your neighbor as yourself. That is what matters most.

Jesus did not say, nor did he expect that we would love perfectly. But even that is all right because if we keep fanning the flame and nurture the longing to love God deeply, that longing will shape a life filled with meaning, service, and purpose. And if we keep fanning the flame and nurture the longing to love our neighbor deeply, that longing will shape a life filled with generosity, selflessness, and kindness.

If we long to love God and neighbor, long for that which is the deepest of deep connections, we will stay on a spiritual path for a lifetime. If we long for the immensity of love that is possible with God and neighbor, we will fan the flame ignited at birth.

We know we are created in the image of God, and believe there is a divine spark within us at birth. That divine spark is the source of the longing and burning inside—the longing and burning desire to know God, to love God and to love each other fully. We spend our lives trying to fulfill the earliest, primal, longing for God inside us. Because we long to love God, be loved by God, and love one another, we are often restless, anxious, seeking and searching until we understand, name and are committed to fulfilling our longing for God. I think it is why people stumble into church and say they do not understand exactly why they came. They make restless motions with their hands, they say something made them come and then they sit in the back and cry. Asked later what they experienced, newcomers often say: I don't know why I came, but then I felt God's love in this place and realized how long I had missed it and how much I needed it.

I think people LONG to be known by God, to be loved by God, to love God, and to love one another and they come to our door churned up and confused, empty and edgy. I think they have an unnamed longing.

I think each one of us is a twitchy ball of longing—longing to be united with God...longing to love God with all our hearts, all our souls and all our minds and to love each other selflessly.

And so we take hands and we search together, and we love God together, and we build community, and we love one another, and we support each other, and pray hard together—all because we share this burning and longing inside.

I believe that the longing is good. When we sense the immensity of love that is possible, our lives are changed, our priorities are altered and we walk faithfully toward God. The point is not to arrive. The point is to journey, never letting the longing diminish.

“If you want to build a ship, don't drum up people together to collect wood and don't assign them tasks and work, but rather **teach them to long for the endless immensity of the sea.**”

Jesus wanted to build disciples and so he said: all those laws in the Torah, they matter. But the greatest commandment of all? That's love.
Love God with all your heart, soul, and mind.
And love your neighbor as yourself.

Long for the endless immensity of love...for that longing will help you create that love. Each day you will walk toward that dream, that feeling, that place of oneness with God.

Love God and love each other. That's what matters.
All the rest is commentary.

Amen.