

2/26/06

And now; may the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart, be acceptable in thy sight, O God, my strength and my redeemer.

For the kids: How many of you *received* valentines this month? From whom? Who gave you the valentines? Why? To show you they like you? To let you know they love you? How many of you *gave* valentines this month? To whom? Your friends? Your mom or dad? Your grandparents? Why? To show them you like them? To let them know you love them?

How many of you gave a valentine to *yourself*? Anyone? How come? Why don't we send valentines to ourselves?

That's what I want to talk about today. About the valentines we *don't* send. And about love. About the *need* for love. About the *greatness* of love. About how, in truth, as we just sang, *love is all we need*.

But above all, I want to talk about loving *ourselves*.

Love features in both scripture readings today. In Paul's 1<sup>st</sup> Letter to the Corinthians, he states that without love we have nothing. We can have prophetic powers, understand all mysteries, possess all knowledge, but without love none of these matters. Love is even greater than faith and hope. It is the greatest of all things. It never ends.

As many of you probably recognized, this scripture passage is often read at weddings—was, in fact, read at *my* wedding—and is used to emphasize the qualities of love. Love is patient, kind, not envious or boastful, not arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way; is not irritable or resentful; does not rejoice in wrongdoing but rejoices in truth. Love bears all things, endures all things, believes all things, hopes all things. No wonder we read this at weddings. If people really loved each other this way, our marriages would be amazing!

But we don't. Not that I'm trying to tell any of you what your marriages are like—but... I suspect that most of us drop the love ball pretty frequently. We *want* to love. In this passage, we even have something of a prescription for love, and yet, we still have a really hard time loving.

Why?

I'm going to suggest that we go back to those valentines we *don't* send. The ones to ourselves. I believe that *we're going to have a hard time loving others unless we love ourselves first.*

Let's take a look at today's gospel reading, a passage that can be found in both Mark and Matthew, in which Jesus summarizes "all the law and the prophets" in the following manner, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and the first commandment, and the second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

Note that, in the first commandment, Jesus didn't say, you shall *obey* God, or you shall *serve* God, or you shall *think about* God, or even, you shall *worship* God. He said, you shall *love* God. *Love* God. We shall open our hearts to God. We shall connect with God. We shall take pleasure in God. *That's* different! Something to think about in and of itself. But today I'm going to focus on the second commandment, "you shall love your neighbor as yourself."

Let's stop here a moment. What do these words *mean* to you? Right here. Right now. Close your eyes and think about them, "you shall love your neighbor as yourself."

(Pause)

If you're anything like me, you probably focused on the first phrase of that passage, "you shall love your neighbor..." Now that's a great start. And, really, it relates to the reason we read the passage from Corinthians at weddings. We want people to understand that love is important and that the way in which we love *others* is important. All good. But *not enough*. Because Jesus didn't stop there. He continued. He said, "you shall love your neighbor, *as yourself*." Or stated differently, you shall love your neighbor the way that you love yourself.

And, the truth is, we will. We'll love our neighbor exactly as much as we love ourselves. And no more. Because the way the equation is written and the way it plays out in our lives is that we cannot love others any more than

we can love ourselves. And if we aren't able to fully love ourselves it isn't going to matter how many good deeds we do, how much money we give, how many volunteer hours we plug in, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. Because *we can only love others as much as we love ourselves.*

But, you might say, I know people who love themselves, *and it ain't that pretty.* They always put themselves first, consider their own needs before the needs of others, seem to have no problem doing whatever makes them feel good..... they're actually pretty obnoxious! I agree. And, I contend, *that is not what love looks like.* Because the passage in First Corinthians really *does* give us a prescription for love. It is patient, it is kind, it is not arrogant or boastful or rude....

So what *does* it mean to love ourselves and, therefore to love others?

First, I should ask if you remember that saying of Jesus about it being easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to get into heaven. Because, as true as *that* may be, I think he might just as well have said that it would be easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a person to learn to love herself.

*Why?* Because we're afraid. Afraid we're not enough. Afraid we're not lovable. Afraid we're not okay. And afraid that if we stop-- stop the busyness, stop the over scheduling, stop filling every space with work, with tv, with appointments, with the news, that we will have to face this. But why? Because we've forgotten who we are. We've forgotten that we came from love and are part of love, that this is our heritage, our birthright, our identity. And somehow, and I say this with such great compassion for all of us, it is so terribly difficult for us to open our hearts and remember.

Listen to the Shema: *Shema Yisrael, Adonai Elohenu, Adonai Echad.* Hear O Israel (Listen, people!), the Lord Our God (God, the Mystery, the I Am), the Lord is One (God is One—God is All). So retranslated, *Listen, people—God is here and God is All.* There is no separation. There is no “other.” We are a part of the All.

We are all a part of God. We are all connected to one another. What I do to myself, I do to you. What you do to yourself, you do to me. *So how we care for ourselves really matters.* It matters because it is completely connected to how we care for others.

So what does it mean to love ourselves and, therefore, to love others?

I've found that love looks like the end of fear. The end of worrying that what we do will never be enough. Love looks like trust. Love looks like the relinquishing of control. Love looks like the knowledge that we are enough. That we don't have to do more. That we don't have to be different. Love looks like a huge sigh of relief, a handing over of our burdens, the knowledge that we are not alone. Love looks like mercy, like acknowledgement that we are human and will sometimes miss the mark. Love looks like giving ourselves a break. Love looks like connection. It looks like the realization that we are, in fact, inseparable from the All, and that we can say hello to *ourselves* in the faces of *others*. Love looks like the erasure of boundaries—not good, healthy psychological boundaries that enable us to say “no” to others when it's good to say “no”—but the erasure of the sort of boundaries created by fear, that lead us to believe there *is* an “other.” That lead us to need to *create* an “other.” Love erases the boundaries that create *separation*— from each other, from the world around us, from God.

And, finally, love looks like Sabbath. Why Sabbath? Because Sabbath (and I'm talking about a concept not a specific day of the week) is when we give up control. Sabbath is when we *stop* managing. Sabbath is when we trust that God really *will* provide. That the burden is *not* all on our shoulders. Sabbath is when we rest. Sabbath is when we *stop running*. Sabbath is when we realize that we're loved, that we're meant to enjoy this beautiful creation. God, Mystery, Creator, whatever word you want to use—*Divine Spirit* created this world for enjoyment, for love if you will, and wants *us* to enjoy it as well.

When we stop, we make space for love. And find that it was there all along.

If you *were* to send yourself a valentine, what would it say?