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## The Salvation and Work of Love

Today's Gospel passage is what my Dad would refer to as a slow pitch. Something you should be able to hit right out of the park. Hearing Jesus' famous words, as the lawyer in our reading from Matthew is presented with the greatest commandment, Love God and love your neighbor as yourself, you'd think... yeah, duh, we knew that. But, if this is such an easy pitch why do we, or at least I'll speak for myself, why do I, never seem to actually hit it out of the park. Why do I keep swinging and missing over and over and over again. In his book, *The Art of Loving*, Erich Fromm (a 20th c. German-American Social Psychologist) begins by saying that "There is hardly any activity, any enterprise, which is started with such tremendous hopes and expectations, and yet, which fails so regularly, as love." If you know anything about Fromm's theories on love, than I will tell you there are aspects of his theories I strongly disagree with, but if you do not know Fromm's work then disregard that comment, and let's move on. Because the overarching argument that love is an art we must dedicate our lives to if we wish to find the freedom and life fulfilling benefits that it offers, is something I can strongly get behind, and I think something that can serve us well.

The striving, means to an end, or goal of many faiths (if not all), one could argue, is freedom from the suffering that is an inevitable symptom of the human condition. For Jews the cure is connection to God by living into the teachings of the Torah. For Muslims it is devotion to God by following the five pillars of Islam. For Buddhist it is Nirvana or the extinguishing of desires by self emptying. And for Christians it is salvation by following the way of Jesus Christ. Now, I am just going to go ahead and say that these are all really quick and dirty (possibly even crude) ways of summing up the goals of a few of our world's major religions. But, what I am trying to get at is this, as humans throughout time, cultures, powers, principalities, and religions we have all been striving to find some way to end our continued and seemingly inescapable suffering. Seeking to find a balm to soothe the pains of this world, to make us a little lighter despite the weight of the world, a little fuller with the divine presence, and a lot more joyful in our earthly journey.

For Fromm, who I mentioned earlier, all human suffering is caused by our longing for connection. When realizing ourselves as separate or alone in this world we undergo great suffering, anxiety, and shame. In order to free ourselves from the prison of our suffering we seek connection. And it is only through real, active, and mature love that we can find true, meaningful, and lasting connections, ending our suffering. And, this love, to which Fromm speaks, is achieved, by giving, much more than it is by receiving. So, if, for Christians, freedom from the problem of human suffering is salvation through Jesus Christ, who tells us, "I am the way, the truth and the light." What the heck is that way, that truth, or that light? One might argue, and that one might be me, that it is by way of living out Jesus' Greatest Commandment. Loving the Lord our God with all our heart, mind and soul, and loving our neighbor as ourselves. But, as I said earlier, if this were easy, there would not still be so much pain, suffering, and division in our world. We would have reached salvation, and the kingdom long long ago. So, what are we doing wrong? Maybe it is that love, real love, is hard work.

As a mother of young children I have the privilege of witnessing fresh new lives experience things for the first time. Take for example infants, aged 0 to about 18 months, did you know they cannot see or know themselves apart from their mothers? If you take a mother and put, per say, a scribble of marker on her face, and then show the infant their mother, the infant will immediately begin rubbing their face, in an effort to remove the marker. Because they see their mother as a mirror, not as a separate being. They know themselves in and as much as they know their mother. Experiencing life in those first months through the lens and experience of being intimately tied and connected to another person. It's both remarkable and beautiful. As a mother of twins I have another unique perspective. Watching my boys grow, from infants connected to me, to toddlers forging their own way, and now children finding their way in the world and more so their connection to each other. While I have worried for much of their lives that my boys were not connecting, now I have a new worry. As I have watched them create, more recently, a close interpersonal and interconnected bond. Which shows itself all the time now. Like for example, the other day, when Thomas hit Patrick in the face. Patrick came over to me wailing and crying, and I went over to Thomas instructing him to apologize to his brother Patrick. At which time I watched Thomas take Patrick aside, behind a door, look him in the eye and in some form of twin speak apologize to his brother, as they both hugged it out. Spending the rest of the evening in play with one another.

There is a theory that, before we can love another, we first must love ourselves. But, I am not quite sure that's how it works. Because, I think first before anything else, we have to understand the gift of experiencing and sharing love. Like an infant who is so loved simply because they exist in this world, and by virtue of that existence knows themselves in and as much as they experience the loving gaze of their mother. Or like my twins, learning that sharing a hug, or a hand, or a toy is much more enjoyable, rewarding, and less painful than hitting someone in the face with a miniature monster truck.

If, for us as Christians, salvation, or more simply an end to suffering, is found by following the way of Jesus Christ. And, that way, is summed up by the great commandment. Then, how might we find ways to give ourselves over in love a little more each day? Maybe, like an infant, by staring into the loving gaze of God. Through scripture, prayer, or simply silent presence. Or, like my boys, by finding more ways to share with one another, instead of constantly bickering. Sharing things like our time, our attention, and maybe then in turn our love. Or even like Jesus himself, coming to see others through the same loving gaze that our creator sees us? Embracing others as they are, coming to offer a balm instead of a harsh word, or a seat at the table instead of a cold shoulder, or even ourselves just as we are, not as others would wish us to be. Because, it is only in giving ourselves over in love, that we can find ourselves as loved, and more and more come to know that same love! That love that we share, that love we experience, that love that loved us first!