

Longing for Love

Deuteronomy 6:5; Matthew 22:37-39

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This season of Advent we have looked at how we have a Longing for Hope, Longing for Peace, Longing for Joy and today, Longing for Love. But I have to tell you, on a lighter note, something I have always longed for was to learn how to dance. So watch this... (*video of Jody & Mark dancing*).

See what I mean. I still long to be a good dancer. And in an attempt to be a good dancer, one Christmas years ago, my girlfriend and I gifted our husbands with ballroom dance classes. For 6 weeks, one night a week, I tried to learn to dance. Mark was so patient with me but I just couldn't make my body or my feet move the way I really wanted. My heart was in it, but the rest of me was struggling. I still long to dance well, but I'm really not a good dancer. Or, maybe I don't believe I'm a good dancer because I always am looking "out there," comparing myself to others instead of feeling the music inside me and enjoying the movement.

You know this happens to me often; I notice something about someone else and fail to look within myself. I am reminded of how much easier it is to notice what is "out there" rather than what is "in here."

So, when we think about this season of Advent as we are longing for Faith, longing for Hope, longing for Joy, and longing for the Love of Christ to be born in us, I wonder if we are tempted to primarily search for ways to meet these longings outside of us instead of inside ourselves. We certainly long to experience love with others, our extended family, friends, church family, our community, especially this Christmas, and we grieve that we are unable to share this season in person during this year. It's important to take time and space to grieve these losses, and then imagine how we can connect in a way that we haven't before, as well as even connecting with the love within ourselves.

So today, we will talk about some of the ways we may be longing for love, and what scripture says about a way to address this longing for love.

Here is one way I realized I was longing for love. Christmas is so commercialized that I have come to think that my love is shown and felt based on the gifts I give or receive. While gift giving is certainly one way we show love, it's not the only way to express love. I remember one time when the kids were little, I went out on Christmas Eve day to our friend's toy store and told the owner, "I feel like I just need one more thing for the kids." I'll never forget what our friend said. He said, "Jody, you don't need to buy anything else. The best gift you are giving is to provide them with what you are already giving them, your gift of love." That's a great memory etched in my mind.

When I think of Jesus, my view of his life is of someone who lived fully embracing life and love from the inside. Religious leaders compared Jesus to their selves and he did not fit the image they believed a religious leader should have, so they sought to entrap him with tough religious questioning. They didn't seek to know his heart, but they only looked at how he was so different from them. So one day, in an attempt to entrap him, they asked him a question. "What is the greatest commandment?" Jesus answered by quoting the Old Testament from Deuteronomy 6:5, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul and all your mind." And then he added this, "This is the first and greatest commandment and the second is equally important. Love your neighbor as yourself." This is referenced in the first Gospel, Matthew 22:37-39 and it's repeated at least eight other times that I found in the Bible.

I remember being taught this verse as a way to learn to experience joy. Here was the teaching: J O Y – Jesus 1st, others 2nd, and yourself last. Jesus, Others, You... in that order. So, I sought to live by this. I was really confused as I studied this scripture in later years. Each time I read this scripture it occurred to me that the last part, love your neighbor as yourself, sounded as if it was something simple, easy, and that it just came naturally. But I often wonder is it that simple? Am I able to love myself no matter what. I really don't think it's that easy and I don't believe the command is a literal 1st, 2nd, 3rd thing to do. Loving God, loving my neighbor, and loving myself works altogether. But, I spent many years of my life thinking I had to put myself last... really neglecting to love myself. I did not practice being self-aware and being in-touch with what

was going on inside of me, therefore not truly able to love myself.

Here's an honest self-reflection related to this from a recent event in all of our lives: The very first time I saw the video of George Floyd being suffocated to death because of a knee on his neck, I couldn't watch, I literally turned my head away. I could not stand to see someone being tortured and killed. But then I felt guilty. I didn't want to turn away from something like that. I felt ashamed that I wanted to distract myself from such a horrible injustice. I didn't want to believe it was true. But thankfully there were millions of people who chose to do something to demand "enough is enough." So I chose to watch, and to listen better, and learn from our black brothers and sisters. And as I chose to take a closer look, I also became aware that I was actually turning away from other's pain because I had not made it a practice, a spiritual practice, to consistently look at my own sadness and pain. So I was challenged to meet my pain, with love and compassion...not turning away from my pain or just telling myself something to make myself feel better. I actually needed to feel my hurt and love myself in the midst of it. Love your neighbor as yourself.

I've realized that the very longing we have to be loved by someone else, or from something external is so natural. It's ultimately really never going to fulfill that longing for love until I practice loving God's greatest creation... which is loving myself and you loving yourself.

So, the best way we can love others really is to love ourselves. Listen to my friend Katie as she shares about loving your neighbor as yourself. (Video)

Radical self-love is the starting place for us to love others and to love God. And as we are longing for love on this fourth Sunday of Advent, let's begin by loving ourselves better. By providing love and compassion for ourselves without judgment and self-loathing that causes us to live in shame. You are a beautiful loving creation, made in the image of God, you are designed for love. So I may not be the best dancer at the party, but I can love the steps I take and love the power of music to move me.

Maybe that's why one of my favorite pieces of art in the sanctuary is of the children dancing. It is with this image that I want to now invite you into an ancient spiritual practice of Visio Divina. This is similar to Lectio Divina, which we have been practicing this month. With the scripture we have focused upon, Love the

Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind and to love your neighbor as yourself. We will take a few moments to focus on this piece of art as a means of prayer. Visio Divina means divine seeing. And so we are entering into the scripture more deeply through visual art. So let us pause now and quietly meditate upon this beautiful piece of art.

1. Ask God to guide your thoughts and impressions through the Holy Spirit.
2. Gaze...take in the painting. Notice the placements of people and objects, the shapes and form, use of light and shadow...what catches your attention?
3. Reflect...pay attention to how you feel, what you're thinking. How does this image deepen your understanding of the text, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind; and love your neighbor as yourself."
4. Respond and Receive...carry the image and impressions with you into the weeks ahead. What is God inviting you to? Rest in what God shows you and allow yourself to feel love and compassion.

God extends the invitation for all to love the child within each of us and to come and dance in the mystery of life of God's story...being present to oneself, in weakness, lost or found, unforced rhythms, hand in hand, heart to heart, side by side, to come and dance together with love and compassion to oneself in the mystery of life. Now this is the dance I am ready to dance. Will you join me? Let us pause and listen to this as we reflect on what we have experienced today. (Song: *Come and Dance in the Mystery*)

Just by God's creation of us, we are invited into a loving relationship with our Creator God, our neighbor and ourselves... altogether, not in any order. By being more aware of what we are feeling, thinking and doing, we are invited to be heart to heart, hand in hand with love and compassion, without judgment to ourselves. Then, love naturally ripples out into the world.

Take time this week to use Lectio or Visio Divina, meditate on a song, painting, scripture, nature, as a time of prayer of listening to God speak and bring love and compassion to what you become aware of within yourself. Remember you are loving God and others as you love yourself.