As some of you know one way I’ve battled the stresses of this pandemic time, especially for the past several weeks, has been to dive into the life and writing of Henry David Thoreau. Honestly I’ve wanted to read Thoreau for many years, but for a variety of reasons – and yes, perhaps even a variety of excuses – I never actually cracked a book.

But all of that has finally – and thankfully – changed. Reading about Thoreau’s life and especially reading his own words has become a way of getting me to my “happy place.” His time in the Maine Woods; floating down the Concord and Merrimack Rivers; climbing Mount Katahdin; living for two years, two months and two days in a tiny cabin at Walden: experiencing each of these through his biography and his writing has been a balm for me.

They also have been a valuable personal reminder. They remind me of how the mountains, woods and streams encountered at different times in my own life have shaped me. They remind me that beauty can be found in anything and in any place if I simply take time to slow down and look. They remind me that the inspired work of God is all around me, the earth the canvas on which creation has been painted. They remind me that the voice of God speaks through bird song and breeze, through the sound of flowing rivers and in the crunch of the autumn leaves beneath my feet.

Thoreau’s journals are an especially rich source for his thoughts and reflections on life and the world. In recent days, two lines from an entry he wrote in March 1842 jumped off the page and continue to cling to me. As he wrote, “I must not be for myself, but God’s work, and that is always good.” Later in that same entry we find him asking, “Why, God, did you include me in your great scheme?” They are the words of someone who was only 24 years old at this point, still a little over three years before he began his great experiment of isolated and deliberate living on the shores of Walden Pond.

I think one reason these two lines linger with me is because I see a connection between them and the words of Jesus in this morning’s Gospel reading. Like Thoreau finding every opportunity to escape from the things in his world that were perceived to be important so that he could find what was truly important, Jesus here casts aside much of what the religious and political leaders of his time may have considered important and turns attention to what – for those listening to him on that day and for each one of us today – should be and in fact is the most important thing: love.

Here we have yet another scene, like the ones we have heard over the past several weeks, in which the Pharisees are trying to trap Jesus – in this instance, a solitary lawyer, representing the Pharisees in some way I think as a prosecutor. We certainly have to give them credit for being persistent and continuing to try to ensnare him, although at the conclusion of this passage they finally decide enough is enough and from that time forward were never again bold enough – some may say foolish enough – to question him. Before reaching that point, however, they give it one more try by asking Jesus to sift through the

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hundreds of laws and commandments of their faith and tell them which single one is the most important.

As one commentator has written, “The question immediately poses a theological problem for Jesus. How can one law be greater than another? ... Do some laws mean more to God than others?”

How does Jesus answer? Simply, he answers not by telling them something they are looking to hear but instead what he wants them to hear. He does so not by going to the Ten Commandments or some other law that would have been expected, but by offering an interpretation of the familiar words that could be considered the root of their faith: the Shema. It’s a cornerstone prayer of the Jewish faith, one which I’ve mentioned a few times in past sermons.

Sh’má Yisra’eil, Adonai Eloheinu, Adonai echad. “Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone.” By going back to this prayer and statement of faith, Jesus begins by telling those around him, “Because the Lord your God is One, you shall love the Lord with the entirety of your being.” Then going even further, Jesus turns to another of the ancient commandments, words from Leviticus that likely none of the Pharisees were expecting him to use: “You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord.”

His answer goes against individualism and self-interest. Jesus tells them they should shift attention away from themselves and towards others. He is saying they should offer their love first and most importantly to God and then, similarly, give it to others with the same intensity with which they love themselves. It’s an important point and goes to the heart of a two-part question: can you even love God without loving your neighbor, and can you love God and your neighbor if you’re focused on first loving yourself?

In my opinion, the answer to both parts is “no,” and it is here that I circle back to the two lines from Thoreau that I highlighted earlier.

First the question “Why, God, did you include me in your great scheme?” From what we’ve heard in this morning’s passage, we were included in this great scheme of God’s because we are meant to love. Back at the beginning of Lent (seemingly eons ago at this point!), I spoke about a fascinating concept I learned in a seminary class on the Quran, and it in some respects goes to the heart of the question with which Thoreau is wrestling. Remember that God created us out of love. As parts of that creation, each of us as I learned constitutes a small part of a mirror of that creation, brought into existence to reflect that love. Every living thing that has ever existed ... all that was brought into being in the six days of creation and all that has been in succeeding generations and millennia ... was and is here to reflect God’s love back to God, and to reflect back the bit of the holy found within each one of us.

That of course then goes to Thoreau’s second point, “I must not be for myself, but God’s work, and that is always good.” The work of God which we are meant to be doing is the work of focusing not on ourselves, but on others ... to be a reflection of God’s love to others

3 Deuteronomy 6:4 (NRSV).
4 Erickson.
5 Leviticus 19:18 (NRSV).
... to be recipients of God’s love that others in turn reflect back to us. When we love, then yes indeed it is always good.

Think of how it may have sounded to that lawyer standing before Jesus on that day if the two commandments shared with him had been distilled even further into a single word. “Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” He said to him, ‘Love.’” Just that one word. Love.

In the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, the word “love” is found 317 times in the Old Testament and 221 times in the New. It is important. It is vital. It is that to which we are called. It is that which equips us to do everything good in the service of God. Love. Love. Love. John Lennon was indeed onto something when he wrote, “There’s nothing you can do that can't be done ... Nothing you can sing that can't be sung ... Nothing you can make that can't be made ... No one you can save that can't be saved ... Love is all you need.”

Why did God include us in his great scheme? To love. What is the first and greatest commandment? To love. What is the second that is like it? To love.

Go and do likewise. Go and love.

Amen.

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