

The Shema is a Jewish prayer said by many faithful Jews on a daily basis in the morning and at night. It is a central declaration of the Jewish faith, found in the Book of Deuteronomy and Numbers, affirming the oneness of God and the importance of loving the Eternal Sovereign. It begins with these words "Hear, O Israel: or Shema O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might."

This prayer seems straightforward enough. We are to love. We are to use our heart, our soul, and our strength; our whole being, to love. The thing is, to do this well, we have to know what we mean when we refer to each of these parts of ourselves. We also need to resolve the matter of the original Shema not matching what Jesus says. You see, Jesus throws something new into the mix. When he quotes the Shema in the Gospel of Mark, he adds an additional element to a prayer he would have been taught as a child and known forwards and backwards. Jesus gives a slight variation, adding "mind" to the equation.

It's fair for us to wonder about this apparent tweaking of the text. Is it evidence of a poor translation? Or of the limitations of moving between

different languages - from Hebrew to Greek? Or is something else going on here? Could this expansion of the text by Jesus be deliberate?

You see, there are differences between how a Hebrew speaking and a Greek speaking person might hear this text. In ancient Hebrew thought, the heart was seen as the center of a person's entire being—essentially the primary place where feelings and thoughts converge. But this image of an all encompassing heartspace might not have been as obvious to the Greek speakers in the crowd. Because for Greeks, the heart contained ones thoughts, but it was the mind that shaped those thoughts into intellectual understanding and insight. These two groups of people would have had radically different ideas of what the heart is and how it works. So the question becomes, might this addition of the word mind be a strategy on Jesus' part to engage a diverse audience?

New friends that Lianne and I made while in Ireland gave us parting gifts that included books by John O'Donohue. This Irish poet, author, priest, and philosopher reminds us that “the human heart is never completely born” because the birth of the heart is an on-going process. It takes a physical shape at our birth, but its abilities are not developed until much later, and

even then there is always more room to grow. This is a freeing idea to me; the fact that we learn to love over time. That we don't ever get to a place of perfection, but have plenty of opportunity for improvement.

I've been leading a Bible study with two of our college aged church members and we were discussing this fact. We were contemplating how the way we learn to love ourselves profoundly impacts our capacity to love others. If we develop, for example, a powerful inner Critic that judges everything we do and say, that Critic will do the same to others through us. If we convince ourselves that we must be flawless to be lovable, then no one in our lives will be lovable to us. These young adults seem to understand that we have to embrace the truth that we are loved by God even in our imperfections, maybe in fact because of our imperfections. We are loved when we stumble; and so we can love others who stumble. We are loved when we fall short; and so we can love others who fall short. We follow a God of grace and compassion who celebrates our efforts to do better and better each day. This is the God who we are urged to love with our whole selves.

Let me tell you a story about learning about love. It's from a children's book called the Invisible String by an author named Patrice Karst. She tells of two children fast asleep in their beds who were woken by a loud storm outside.

The children were afraid and called out for their mother, who tried to assure them that they were safe, but they were not convinced.

"We want to stay with you" they said to her, when she tried to put them back to bed. That's when mom got creative.

"You know we are always together, no matter what!" She then held up her hand and said this is how.

"We are connected by an invisible string called love. Even though you can't see it you can feel it.

When you are away from me and miss me your love travels all the way along the string until I feel it tug at my heart.

It can reach as deep as the sea, and as high as a mountain. It can reach across the miles and even beyond this life."

"What about when you're mad at us?" asked one of the kids.

The string never goes away" answered the mom.

“Love is stronger than anger, and as long as love is in your heart the string is always there. It’s even there when you can’t agree on things and argue.”

As the children fell asleep, they started dreaming of all the invisible strings they had, and all the strings their friends had, and their friend’s friends had, until everyone in the world was connected by love - a web of strings holding all the world in love.

Earlier I said that Hebrew and Greek speaking people in Mark's Gospel would have had radically different ideas of what the heart is and how it works. I don’t know if they would have argued about it, but I can imagine how their differences might have gotten in the way of creating a community that worked well together. We as human beings seem poised for such polarization. Our differences often define us more concretely than our similarities, but that is a choice we make.

We CAN learn to love in a way that allows for careful confrontation, healthy boundaries, and a willingness to adapt to one another’s ways of understanding the world, just as Jesus adapted to his audience.

Jesus' teachings sought to not only fulfill the law, but to transcend it, moving from ritualistic observance to a heart-centered faith. His adaptation of the Shema is part of his larger theological framework that calls for a radical love that transforms both the individual and the community.

O'Donohue wrote something else that sparked hope in me. He said that "Love is absolutely vital for a human life, for love alone can awaken what is divine within...In love [we] grow and come home to [our] self." When we experience genuine unconditional love it awakens something holy in us, and that is the love that Jesus calls his followers to; a love that is total and unwavering. A love that engages every part of our being in relationship with the Divine and with one another such that we all become ONE.

We began our worship this morning with a simple song based on this passage. I hope that the tune sticks with you, and that it serves as a tool for remembering the text, but even more, I hope that it helps us embrace the truth that each one of us is on a journey of growth in our capacity to love, and each one of us needs care and compassion for that heartspace to thrive.

Song: Love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind and love your neighbor as yourself. Let us be known, let us be know, by the say we love. Love, love, the greatest commandment is love. Amen.

Benediction:

As we navigate the complexities of our hearts, let us hold onto this promise: we are continually invited to grow in love, to discover the depth of our shared humanity, and to embrace the beauty of our imperfect selves.