

First Congregational Church Weekly Newsletter

East Longmeadow, MA



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PASTORAL MEDITATION by Reverend Thomas Hawkins

VALENTINE'S DAY AND THE MEANING OF LOVE

In 1847 Boston pharmacist Oliver Chase invented a machine that made apothecary lozenges. Like other pharmacists of his time, Chase sold these lozenges for sore throat relief. But the same machine could just as easily stamp out small pieces of candy. Candy made with Chase's machine turned out to be such a success that he eventually gave up with medicinal lozenges and founded the New England Confectionary Company or NECCO to manufacture his candy lozenges. During the 1860s, Oliver's brother Daniel Chase experimented with printing words on the company's candies. He devised a machine that used vegetable ink and a felt roller pad to print words into the candy paste before it was cut and baked into lozenges. As a result, Sweetheart candies—those small candy hearts with quirky sayings printed on them-- were born. Each Valentine's Day season, NECCO sells about eight billion of these tiny heart-shaped lozenges with messages like "Be Mine" or "Kiss Me" (or now "Text Me" or "LOL") around the globe. These little heart-shaped lozenges are second only to chocolates as Valentine's Day candies.

Valentine's Day, our annual celebration of love, happens this week. But what kind of love are we celebrating? Love has become one of the most frequently used words in the English language: I love the weather. I love that dress. I love you. I love that cup of coffee. It is used in so many contexts and to mean so many different things that "love" is a very hard word to define.

How do you define love? Someone once described it as "a merger of pleasure and risk and sacrifice." Another author called love "a dance of alternating vulnerabilities." Other definitions range from "A wellspring of joy" to "A challenge to endless learning by mistake." NPR host Krista Tippett in her book *Becoming Wise: An Inquiry into the Mystery and Art of Living* calls love "the moment to moment evolution of care." We have opted to live love as a feeling," Tippett writes, "when love is actually "a way of being marked by compassion and care."

John's first letter reflects this understanding of love as a way of being. "Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love." (1 John 4:7-8). If God's behavior defines love, then its primary characteristic is the giving of oneself to whatever enhances or shelters the life of another or of the world.

In both Hebrew and Arabic, the root of the word for "womb" where life is generated is also the root of the word for "compassion." (*Rechem* and *Rahem*). Loving is generative. It gives itself to the nurturing of life beyond itself.

Xavier Le Pichon is a biophysicist. He has spoken about how we usually tell the story of our human evolution in terms of tools and skills. In this version of the story, humankind progresses when we learn to knap flint blades, domesticate animals and plants, or smelt iron. But what most strikes Le Pichon is the fossil evidence that Neanderthals and early humans cared, often at great effort and sacrifice, for people in their groups who were injured or disabled or elderly. "They reorganized themselves around the small ones, the babies...people in great difficulty through suffering or sickness, because of handicap, or because life is coming to an end. And that's really very new and special. It becomes a society which we call *human, humane*...There is a new touch, a new kindness, a new softness, a new way of living, which is completely introduced by the fact that you put the weakest at the center of the community."

Archeologist and BBC journalist Neil Oliver produced a television documentary a few years ago on the Vikings. As part of it, he visited a Viking village that flourished more than one thousand years ago in Sweden and then was abandoned. In its cemetery, archeologists unearthed the grave of a young girl. Her grave goods as well as her fragile, undersized bones are displayed in the Stockholm Museum: a necklace of 21 glass beads, a gold-plated brooch, and a small cylinder carved from bone that contained several tiny bone needles. All these expensive and symbolic gifts indicate how much she was loved. She is known as Birka Girl and, when scientists re-assembled her bones, they determined she was perhaps six-years old. More surprisingly, her reassembled skull revealed an unexpected deformity that suggested Birka Girl may have been carried in the womb of a mother who drank too much alcohol

during the nine-months of her pregnancy. The facial features and bones resemble those of infants born with what we now call fetal alcohol syndrome.

Despite her fragile, almost doll-like size and her unexpected physical and most likely mental deformities, the richness of her burial goods as well as the prominent placement of her grave within this Viking cemetery suggest she was much loved and treasured by the community that sheltered her and later laid her tenderly to rest. Neil Oliver writes of Birka Girl, “That someone so slight, the least of them you might say, was so mourned and missed says a great deal about what matters most about having been alive in the world... The least of us, the barest trace we make and without thinking, might matter most of all. To have been loved at all might be everything a person will ever need.”

Valentine’s Day comes once each year to remind us that love is not a hormonal charge or a sentimental feeling but rather a way of being. Love is a way of choosing to live in which we give of ourselves to the nurturing of others, particularly to the sheltering and strengthening of those who are voiceless, fragile, undervalued, or marginalized. “Love is patient; love is kind...it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.” (1 Corinthians 13:4-7)

Happy Valentine’s Day,

Pastor Thomas

SUNDAY WORSHIP in the sanctuary or livestream link: <http://www.facebook.com/churchontherotary/>

KENSINGTON FOOD PANTRY- Valentine Collection

We continue to serve the families at Kensington School, helping them feed their children through the cold winter months. The need is great and we fill five bags each week for five different families. February is the month we kick off our “Share the Love” food drive. Pick up a grocery bag in the breezeway and **return the bag by February 22nd**. This church really knows how to “Share the Love” of God and I want to thank you for your continuing support. We couldn’t do this important work without you.

GIFT TO “Friends of East Longmeadow Council on Aging”

Just a reminder...over a year ago St. Paul’s Evangelical Lutheran Church in East Longmeadow closed it’s doors after 132 years. Their remaining assets were distributed to a variety of organizations with the intention of having St. Paul’s legacy live in the lives and hearts of their neighbors and friends.

We gratefully and joyfully accepted a generous gift of \$18,000, planning to continue St. Paul’s legacy through gifts to small, local non-profits researched and chosen by your Mission and Outreach Committee.

We have decided to make our last \$2000 donation to “The Friends of East Longmeadow Council on Aging”. This 501(c) (3) non-profit organization plans and provides programs at the Pleasant View Senior Center to support, and enrich the lives of our senior community members.

They provide financial support for meals on wheels, flu clinics, blood pressure testing and exercise classes. They plan and sponsor social service programs including music programs, dances, sing-a-longs, and club meetings...to just name a few. This unexpected responsibility has been a “labor of love”, a project we never, ever would have dreamed would come our way. Thanks to all who trusted us and supported our choices.

Your M&O Committee

THANK YOU from your Mission and Outreach Committee

Your pledges to our church and additional donations of goods and dollars allow us to continue to support critical programs in our local area, as well as abroad.

Your donations go well beyond funding our church operations (administration, utilities, services and upkeep). Because of your support, we, (in your name) are able to contribute to the East Longmeadow, Food Pantry and Fuel Fund, The Springfield Rescue Mission, the YWCA, the UCC and Church World Service. Your money also provides the meals we serve once each month at Loaves and Fishes, as well as the food we deliver each week to feed 5 needy families at Kensington School. Our mission, our calling is to help our neighbors in need. Thank you for making it possible for us to do that. It is a privilege and a joy.

PRAYER

May Christ's arms of love, spread wide open upon the cross, embrace the loved, the unloved, and those in-between on this most ambiguous of all days in our society's calendar. Be especially with those who are caring for a chronically ill loved one; and with those whose broken hearts grieve over the deaths of loved ones with whom they have shared their lives. Help us to see beyond this often superficial and sometimes isolating thing our society tells us is love. Help us to discover love's meaning in the patient, quiet giving and receiving of care and compassion where and when it is most needed. Amen.



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