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Arlington Street Church
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The Consequence of Love

It doesn't interest me if there is one God
Or many gods.
I want to know if you belong – or feel abandoned;
If you know despair
Or can see it in others.
I want to know
If you are prepared to live in the world
With its harsh need to change you;
If you can look back with firm eyes
Saying "this is where I stand."
I want to know if you know how to melt
Into that fierce heat of living
Falling toward the center of your longing.
I want to know if you are willing
To live day by day

With the consequence of love....¹

With these words, poet David Whyte begins the long list of some of my very favorite questions, questions I want to live into answers, answers I want to experience as they resonate between us and among us. *Living with the consequence of love* is what I want for us, this beloved community, as we embolden one another to love more, and more fiercely.

I'm thinking about love, today – the ways it encourages us (literally, gives us courage) – and I'm thinking about love for the long haul, and about the work of love in spiritual resiliency, or what author Marsha Sinetar calls spiritual hardiness. “If it's true that in later life we can become isolated, withdrawn, or even self-serving,” she writes, “then an unobtrusive kindness toward another is not simply loving. It's restorative. Our own generousities lift us out of narrow concerns to wider, healthier relations. We're not giving to feel better about ourselves – not [giving] ... to get something in return – but [giving] because our [truest nature] is *bountiful*.”²

“Spiritual hardiness,” she continues, “can be learned.... Endurance; robust intent; [and] tenacity ... are spiritual qualities that enhance daily life.... We can understand and cultivate its virtues.... And that learning is ... born ... of courage.”³ Existential psychologist Rollo May called it, “the courage to move

1 David Whyte, “Self Portrait,” from *Fire in the Earth*, 1992

2 Marsha Sinetar, *Don't Call Me Old – I'm Just Awakening*, p. 60

3 *ibid*, p. 61

ahead in spite of despair.”⁴

Living with the consequence of love: we are steadied and held by the beloved community as we recover from disappointment and heartbreak and grief, and even – even! – growing strong at the broken places. We recall the words of American poet Gwendolyn Brooks, from her poem *Paul Robeson*:

... we are each other's
harvest:
we are each other's
business:
we are each other's
magnitude and bond.

Sarah Vowell is the author of a new history of the Puritans – hardly the subject we would have imagined for a smart, edgy young scholar, but we'll get to that in a moment. The book opens on John Winthrop, first governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony: In 1630, Winthrop was twenty-six years old when, crossing the Atlantic from England to America on the good ship *Arabella*, he preached his sermon, *A Model of Christian Charity*, in which he commends his shipmates and future citizens to Jesus' *Sermon on the Mount*, exhorting them to love their neighbors as themselves; and to St. Paul's *Letter to the Corinthians*, directing them to remember that they are, as a community, one body, and “the ligaments of this body which knit together,” he writes, “are love.”

4 Rollo May, *The Courage to Create*, p. 3

“[John] Winthrop,” declares Sarah Vowell, “utters one of the most beautiful sentences in the English language:

We must delight in each other, make each other's conditions our own, rejoice together, mourn together, labor and suffer together, always having before our eyes our commission and community in the work, as members of the same body.

This is the moment we begin to understand why Sarah Vowell embarked on telling the Puritans' story. She writes, “Once I decided to devote years of my life to deciphering the thoughts and feelings of the dreary religious fanatics who founded New England nearly four hundred years ago, I was often asked at parties by my fellow New Yorkers the obvious question, 'What are you working on?' When I would tell them a book about Puritans, they would often take a swig of the beer or bourbon in their hands and reply with either a sarcastic, 'Fun!' or a disdainful, 'Why?'

“....I would never answer with the honest truth. Namely, that in the weeks after two planes crashed into skyscrapers here on the worst day of our lives, I found comfort in the words of [John] Winthrop. When we were mourning together, when we were suffering together, I often thought of what he said, and finally understood what he meant.

“Perhaps my favorite of the countless times I broke into tears in the days following the attack,” Sarah Vowell continues, “I watched citizens happily, patiently standing in a very long line.... They were giving blood.

“...When the local TV news announced that rescue workers sorting through the rubble in search of survivors were in need of toothpaste, half my block, having heard that there was finally something we could actually do besides worry and grieve, had already cleaned out the most popular name brands at the corner deli by the time I got there, so at the rescue workers' headquarters I sheepishly dropped off fourteen tubes of Sensodyne, the toothpaste for sensitive teeth.

“We were members of the same body.... Despite their unruly theology, their sometimes hair-trigger hate, the fact that the image of being members of the same body was so agreed upon to the point of cliché, makes [the Puritans] worth getting to know.

“These English had affection for the Old Saxon word *weal*,” Sarah Vowell concludes. It means wealth and riches, but it means welfare and well-being, too. On the *Arabella* [in 1630, John] Winthrop tells the colonists they must ‘partake of each other's strength and infirmity; joy and sorrow, weal and woe.’

“...[And he] writes that if the colonists hold up their end of the covenant, their deity, ‘will delight to dwell among us as His own people.’⁵ They are not, therefore, merely living for God, they will live with [God].

“For we must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill.”⁶

5 *A Model of Christian Charity*, 1630 (written aboard the *Arabella*)

6 Sarah Vowell, *The Wordy Shipmates*, pp. 50-58

The consequence of love: John Winthrop's dream of a covenanted community, a community marked by *weal*, and, nearly four hundred years later, a city with a skyscraper-sized grave in its center rallying for the living ... members of the same body.

In her 1961 breakthrough book *Mysticism*, Evelyn Underhill recounts the allegorical story in which St. Francis of Assisi offers “the cup of ecstasy” to his fellow monks. Most of the brothers sip tentatively of life's chalice, even spilling much of it, and, as a result, grow misshapen and miserable. This hesitation, this holding-back, is the natural reaction to life on life's terms – the bittersweetness of taking the evil with the good, the grief with the joy. But Brother John of Parma drinks completely, devoutly, and without hesitation, and “straightaway,” it is written, “he became all shining, like the sun.” Brother John alone was “resplendent above all the rest ... [having] more deeply gazed into the abyss of the infinite light divine.”⁷

This is “spiritual hardiness:” to drink of the chalice of life is to be divinely intoxicated; to drink fearlessly and wholeheartedly is to live with the consequence of love.

My spiritual companions, may we, as a community,
be as one body, weal and woe, knit together by love.

⁷ Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism*, p. 237

We are each other's harvest;
we are each other's business;
we are each other's magnitude and bond.

May we seek to drink deeply of the chalice of life,
practicing spiritual hardiness, courageous even in the face of despair,
and so live in radiance,
and be a light unto others – the light of the city on the hill.

Let us fall into the fierce heat of living,
and choose to live, day by day,
with the consequence of love.