

*One Thing*  
Exodus 20:1-3

Frederick Buechner wrote a book called *The Wizard's Tide*, about a boy who was ten when his father committed suicide. The boy was him, but the character in the book is named Teddy. Teddy loved the *Wizard of Oz* books by L. Frank Baum. In one of those books, there was an old man who knew a magic word that could change anything into something else, if you only knew how to pronounce it. This is the word: PYRZQXGL.

And of course Teddy couldn't pronounce that word any more than you or I can. But he tried. He laid awake in bed at night trying every pronunciation he could think of, because even though he knew it was just a story, what if it worked? What if somehow he stumbled on the right combination of sounds, and what if saying it out loud actually did have the magical power to change his life? You can imagine a ten-year-old boy who'd suddenly lost his father doing that, can't you.

Unless we've given up entirely, I think all of us are secretly looking for that one thing that might change our lives. Wondering, even though we know better, if there isn't just one word, one habit or discipline, one relationship, one thing we could do better at, that would fix our broken places, make us happy, let us be *sure* we're headed in the right direction, that we'll be OK no matter what. One thing.

If you're of a certain age, or you're a comedy classic movie buff, you may remember the 1991 film *City Slickers*. Billy Crystal played the lead. In the movie he's a sort of aging millennial. At 39, the professional success he'd been working so hard for doesn't seem to matter very much. He suddenly can see himself growing old without ever finding what's most important in life. And so, in a very 1990's way, he goes to a dude ranch to look for answers, searching for relief from his internal discontent. While he's there, he meets an old cowboy played by Jack Palance. On the first cattle drive of the week, there's this one memorable scene:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xtrQUoRJ\\_W4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xtrQUoRJ_W4)

One thing. Just one thing—if only you knew what it was.

This search for an ultimate thing has always been part of human existence. But over history, and even over our lifetimes, the intensity of the need goes through cycles. I heard a college chaplain say this last week that he has been startled to notice that the most common question undergraduates ask now is not "How shall I live?"; it's "Why should I live?" The disease of existential anxiety that used to be part of a mid-life crisis has now spread, like a pandemic, to 18-22 year olds. And this year, 2020, might be the most critical year of our lifetimes, our generation, for needing to know what matters most.

One thing. The longing is ageless. but the language we use to talk about this soul-need changes over time. Ancient people had fewer choices than we do. They believed that well-being would come by aligning yourself with a supernatural deity who was stronger than all the other spirits fighting for cosmic power; a God who could control weather and wars and illness—all the things that might kill you. Remember all those stories you learned about Greek and Roman gods who battled for strategic advantage? The hardships of human life were mostly wreckage from all those gods' battles with each other. Every tribe of people tried to protect itself by choosing, claiming for themselves, the strongest god, the one who wins most of the time.

It was into that world that the God of the Hebrew people spoke the first commandment:

“I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt,  
out of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me.”

We don't use that language so much today. We don't imagine the world full of many gods who might guard or wreck our well-being, or a universe full of cosmic beings competing for our loyalty. But we are still looking for the one thing that will put everything else in its right place.

And that human longing, for what ancients called a 'god' and we're more likely to think of as an internal guiding principle—that's there in every generation. Fifteen hundred years ago, in the fifth century, the theologian Augustine said, “Our hearts are restless until they find their rest in God.” In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, mathematician and philosopher Blaise Pascal, said, “Every human life has a God-shaped hole inside of it.”

Paul Tillich said the same thing in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Tillich was the theologian version of the Jack Palance character. One thing. Tillich said whatever your ultimate concern is, the thing your life is about attending to, that's your god. A god is the thing that brings out your deepest feelings, your most unyielding attachment. It occupies your mind, and your hope. Sometimes you know it because it's your persistent, regular worry.

But we don't need a great theologian to tell us what already know. Every one of us has tried putting faith in something that turned out to be too small to hold the truth of our lives. We've put our hope in the power of money and found out that even when we have it, nothing changes. We've gone from one relationship to another and found that it was no easier to love this person forever than it was the last person. We searched for the perfect major, a better job, sure that the right career—or maybe only retirement—would make us happy. We've bought and then thrown away ads that promised us that losing weight, or going vegan, a new exercise routine, or the newest technology, will change everything. We wanted to believe that a different politician might put our country on the right track. We've invested years of our lives in our children's success and found that ambition is not something you can deposit into another person. We tried to find a community that would love us completely, be *home* to us, and we have been let down again.

We had such great hope.  
And we have been disappointed.

So I ask you today: Who, or what, is your god now? Where have you deposited your security? What does your life most honor with your hope...or your fear? Where do you invest what is most precious to you: your time, your money, your love, even your hate?

It is so human, so much like every one of us, to try to stuff the God-sized, God-shaped hole inside of us with smaller things. It happens quietly, gradually, insidiously. The things we pack in there are such *good* things: important work, children we are devoted to, an image of ourselves that we like. Our picture of a better world.

Me too. I too slip into trying to fill my longing for a deeper life, something infinite, with things that are never big enough: busyness, my role as a pastor, even my love for the church.

Holding on to this indescribable thing our faith names God is hard...for all of us. God is always half-hidden, a little slippery, mysterious. It's much easier to keep at the center of our lives people we can hold onto, things we can control, results that are tangible. But none of those things can keep a promise to save us, or even to keep us moving in the right direction. Only something Ultimate can do that. Just one thing.

God knows how hard it is for flesh-and-blood people like us to hold onto something spiritual, something made out of a different kind of matter. And so, God reached out to us in a human life. God said, 'Here. I'll show you what I mean.' Jesus came and showed us what a life fastened to the One Thing looks like.

When it was time for Jesus to leave, he said to the people who had seen God in him, 'Here's how you'll remember everything you need to know.'

Just one thing. You don't have to pronounce an impossible word, or memorize a set of rules, or pass anybody's test. You don't have to go to a certain place or find a particular kind of wizard to guide you. You just have to remember one thing:

*The power of love to change everything.*

He showed them: that when you love someone enough to get down on your knees and wash their dirty feet, or whatever is the most scuffed-up part of them...and maybe love the most scuffed-up part of yourself—that's when that knot of hardness and fear inside of you will dissolve.

When your heart opens wide enough to come to the table where the only open seat is next to that guy you have nothing in common with, that woman who is hatefully and stubbornly wrong—*then* even ordinary things can become holiness itself.

One thing, Jesus said. Do this this one single thing. Share my food. Share my life.

And somehow, through two thousand years of distractions since he said that—wars, pandemics, political chaos, natural disasters, lots of other ideas that looked pretty good and promised something better—*this* is the one thing that followers of Jesus have kept coming back to. No matter who they are, no matter what place in the world they live, no matter how smart and rich

and powerful they are or how sparsely their table is set, Christians come *to a table* to remember the one thing. To take in the one thing. To be filled with the one thing that will save us.

This is that table. This is where we remember that there is only One Thing big enough, true enough, satisfying enough, to fill us all. And so today, with all people, all over the world, we gather as a humanity that this year has suffered through a common illness and needed a common healing. No matter who you are, no matter where you've come from or where you think you're going, come and take in this One Thing that is love, broken into enough pieces for everyone.