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Sermon
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Loving the Self

In this morning's passage from Matthew, someone asks Jesus, which is the greatest command. It was a hard question because there were 613 commands. How do you pick just one and not exclude the others? But Jesus has a great response. He distills all the commands into the following: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."

We sometimes call this the Double Command, or paraphrase even further to say the crux of Christianity is "Love God, Love Neighbor." But Jesus doesn't just say love God, love neighbor. Jesus says "Love your neighbor as yourself." And since you can't "love your neighbor AS yourself" if you're not loving yourself, it seems there are really three directives here. To love God and to love neighbor, which is dependent upon loving the self.

I offer this with some trepidation. Because the church has struggled with this last part. Loving God? Yes. Loving neighbor? Of course. Those things make sense. It's not necessarily easy, but at least it sounds like the right thing to do. But to love ourselves?! That sounds selfish. Self-centered. And aren't Christians are supposed to be self-less, humble, giving not taking?

There is also the concern that if we talk about self love it will move us in the wrong direction. That people already love themselves too much while not loving others enough. So the focus should be on loving the neighbor and *not* the self. Not to mention, preaching on loving ourselves might sound like therapeutic Christianity. The equivalent of giving ourselves a big hug. Which, though not a bad idea, doesn't quite capture the higher calling of our faith. Or, as one commentator put it, "Some have speculated that there is a third commandment here—to love ourselves. That resonates nicely with today's pop psychology, but less comfortably with Jesus' call in this Gospel for cross bearing and self-denial."

I get all of this, but what I keep coming back to is if loving the self isn't part of it. If it is, in fact, a dangerous proposal — why would Jesus say it? Why mention the self at all?

Though not explicitly about this command, author Brene Brown addresses some of these concerns in her book [Daring Greatly](#). In it she talks about how we often think the problem in the world today is too many narcissists... or people loving themselves too much. We think, if only

they were knocked down a peg... then wouldn't think they're so great. But in her analysis, it's not that there's too much love in these people's lives or in society. Rather a lack of it. Much like it is with a child who's acting out who doesn't need punishment as much they need attention — to be assured that they are loved and that they matter — many of us need that same assurance. To know within that we are enough. It is not that we need to love ourselves less but to learn to love ourselves properly.

So it is with the greatest command. When we fail to love the neighbor well, the problem isn't that we have too much love for ourselves, but rather, a lack of it. For example, if we are loving ourselves conditionally — like if we're waiting to accept ourselves until we achieve perfection or some idea of success or living up to a certain image — chances are we'll put the same conditions on others — making our love contingent on when they please us, impress us or behave like we want. Or if we've not come to a place of love and acceptance for ourselves, we're likely looking for affirmation and acceptance from other people. But if we're doing that, we're looking to them to give us something; to meet our needs and expectations. Which, again, is conditional.

And if we're caring for the neighbor or any of the people in our lives at the expense of our own needs — in doing non-stop, or feeling like we can't say no or set boundaries — we risk getting overextended, burning out, and feeling resentful about what we're doing. It also means we probably don't have the time to take care of our bodies, minds and souls — the very things that put us in the position to love others well. The things that sustain a lifetime of serving and working for justice.

It is no mistake that loving ourselves is part of the Great Command. In fact, it may be the most challenging part of it. We tend to be our own worst critic and have the hardest time knowing our own God-given value and goodness. And yet, God commands it.

If our desire is to follow this command and love our neighbor well, the remedy is not negating the self as we too often think. Rather, it is to come to love ourselves in a transformed way: to love ourselves as God loves us. To accept ourselves as we are right now. To find our security in God's love for us and not our achievements or outside sources. To know our own value and worth. That we are worth taking time for. We are worth taking care of.

We can ask God to help us experience this love. Not just once in a while, but every day. Like a well we keep going back to. As spiritual beings God's love is our life source. So we have to stay immersed in this part of who are.

And all of this as especially important in the time we're in -- where so many of our usual sources of affirmation are gone. And where many of us have felt like we have to keep pushing to keep up with our work or the needs of those around us. That we can't afford to stop and step back. We

may feel like the many demands coming at us make the greatest claim on us, but God is reminding us otherwise. As Christian, these commands make the greatest claim on us.

Finding ourselves in the love of God and loving ourselves as God does is the foundation for really being able to love. It is vital for the work of loving others. It is necessary if we are to be sustained in working for justice. It is essential if we want to take part in healing the world.

How will we receive this love today?

Amen.