

Leviticus 19:9-18  
Ephesians 5:25-33

St. John's Presbyterian Church  
Devon, Pennsylvania  
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## Loving the One You're Most With

That the Christian faith should call love a *commandment* has often provoked charges of absurdity. Yet that is precisely what Paul does call love in our lectionary text from his letter to the Romans. There is, to be sure, a certain paradox in the notion. Commanding someone to hold a particular affection towards another would be absurd. But then, love is not an affection. When Paul describes love elsewhere in 1 Corinthians, he speaks of it not in terms of the affections—how we *feel* towards another—but as an act of will. Love *chooses* to do certain things: love is kind, it is not arrogant or rude, it does not insist on its own way, it is not irritable or resentful. Love bears, believes, hopes and endures all things. These are not feelings but choices, acts of will.

We need something stronger than how we happen to feel about each other in any given moment. Love takes form as an act of will, a will that desires to lift up the good.

I suspect that no reason for it is stronger than the difficulty so many have with the last little part of the *Shema*, the Jewish prayer from which Paul quotes. It says, “you shall love your neighbor *as yourself*.” It’s that little last phrase, *as yourself*, that gets so little attention. Yet it acts like a linchpin on the wagon. Without it the whole enterprise of Christian devotion to God and others is in jeopardy. *As yourself. You!*—the one you’re with most of all. The one you can’t ever finally shake loose of. The one you take with you into every new venture, every location, every move, relationship, crisis, and yearning. The one you sometimes forget to include when you imagine brighter horizons, new freedoms, different locations. Your intimate, unshakable *self*.

It’s astonishing how little love-of-self is treated in Christian literature. The standard commentaries almost never consider the implications of the phrase, even though this prayer comes up seven times throughout the New Testament. I suspect that’s because an authentic love of oneself and a sort of narcissistic self love get confused, tarred with the same brush of self-centeredness or self-interest. Christians somewhere have been taught that it is sinful to have a regard for oneself so that the very idea has become an alien concept. Yet there it is in Scripture, as bold as day. We cannot love that same humanity in ourselves. Jane Austen’s extraordinary novel, *Persuasion*, paints a brilliant contrast of a father and daughter as two ironic poles. The one, Sir Walter Elliott, is narcissistic to the core, so desperate for affirmation that he is constantly striving to be drawn into the orbit of the highest aristocracy over whom he fawns and simpers, all the while frustrated at his daughter who wears no such pretensions. She, by contrast is at relative peace with who she is: she helps the weak and unfortunate, and radiates a goodness and virtue that is the greater magnetism.

So two loves stand side by side. The one is so blatantly self-serving, like light drawn irresistibly into a black hole where it dies. The other, applauded for its virtue, yet because it radiates light that illuminates other lives, it is perceived as selflessness, when in fact it issues from self-worth. “Love, in principle, is indivisible,” writes Eric Fromm in a superb little book, *The Art of Loving*. “If it is a virtue to love my neighbor as a human being,” he says, “it must be a virtue—and not a vice—to love myself, since I am a human being too.” And that is exactly what the Jewish prayer, the *Shema*, understands so well. Ask any therapist what common symptom lies at the core of most psychological ill health and they will tell you—“lack of self-worth.” Loving God, neighbor and self happen when we first come to terms with the love, the affirmation of God, neighbor, and the best that is in ourselves. The whole works as a reciprocity. Love has to receive the light in order to reflect it.

In his devotional book, *Fishers of Men*, William Barclay tells the story of Muretus, a wandering scholar, very learned and very poor. In his wanderings around ancient Rome, Muretus fell ill and was taken to the place where the destitute were kept. They did not know that he was a scholar and that he understood the scholar’s Latin. The doctors were standing over him discussing his case in Latin. They were saying that he was a poor creature of value to no one, and that it was hopeless and unnecessary to expend care and money or attention on

one so worthless. At that point Muretus looked up, and answering in their own Latin, said, “Call no one worthless for who Christ died.”

Our present worth does not need to be established, it only needs to be embraced.

When I was growing up in England the novels and then the movies of A. J. Cronin’s stories were tremendously popular. Cronin was raised in Scotland and trained there as a doctor before setting up practice in South Wales, and his experiences among the poor Welsh mining communities and their hard existence became grist for many of the novels that he later wrote. Cronin once wrote of a middle-aged nurse he had known named Olwen Davies, who served the people of a small town called Trogeny. Though loved by the people she was paid a pitiful salary, and one night Cronin asked her why she did not insist on more pay. She was worth so much more, he said. Olwen protested that it was all right, that she really had enough to get along. But Cronin said, “You ought to have a pound a week, at least. God knows you’re worth it!”

Then after a slight pause, she smiled and said, “Doctor, if God knows I’m worth it, that’s all that matters to me.”

We are loved. What matters is taking that affirmation to heart.

To say that God loves us for who we are is not to say that God is blind or indifferent to our shortcomings. We need regularly to clear ourselves with God, as we do in our prayer of confession, just as we need regularly to set things right within our own families. The trash has to be taken out at least once a week. We all know how hard it is to live with a polluted spirit. As E. R. Skoglund puts it, self love also means “to evaluate oneself according to one’s strengths as well as one’s weaknesses, one’s potential for growth as well as one’s vulnerabilities.”

Together, we can count a multitude of stories from our own experience that recall how a moment’s affirmation stayed with us subject for a lifetime, maybe even turning a life around. I remember, for instance, a great burly sergeant in the Royal Air Force, an ox of a man with a silver crew cut who, at one of the lowest points in my life, stopped cold on the stairs, looked me square in the eye and growled, “Wilson!” Then those leveled eyes softened, and he said, “You’ll do all right, son!” I remember how my mother, so often when I most needed to hear it, would grab me as a child and hug me and say, “Eee! You’re the best lad in the northern union.” And I would feel like a prince.

Fred Craddock, from whom you’ve heard me borrow stories from time to time, brings another to mind. Now retired, Fred was one of the most active and popular preachers and teachers of preaching in the nation. Back in the fifties Fred and his wife, Nettie, were vacationing in the Appalachian Mountains of Tennessee, delighted to be *in cognito* for a while. They were sitting in a pleasant mountain restaurant about to enjoy a relaxed meal when an old man peered at them over the top of his glasses from a nearby table, looked back at his plate, and then in a double-take glanced back at Fred. “Oh, no!” breathed Fred, “Here we go again.”

The stranger pushed his chair back and ambled over to the Craddock’s table. Quickly, Fred collected a forkful of food from his plate, hopeful that the stranger would get the message. He didn’t. Instead, he walked over, stuck out his hand and introduced himself. Fred mumbled something through a mouthful of food, but clearly the stranger wasn’t going away.

“Have we met before?” asked Fred stifling his irritation.

“No, Don’t believe so,” said the stranger. “But I take you for a preacher. Am I right?”

“You’re right” said Fred, his heart sinking at the prospect of what lay ahead.

“You go on eating,” said the man, helping himself to a chair, “I want to tell you a story.”

“Great!” said Fred looking despondently at Nettie while the stranger dropped into his chair.

After a little awkward small talk the stranger said, “I grew up not too far from here. I never knew who my parents were, and the kids in the neighborhood and at school used to call me names something awful. Gave me a devil of a time. I used to run from them most of the time. Lived in fear of coming up on them because it was always so painful.

“Anyway, there was this church I’d go to not too far off. Country church—country folk. But still the kids and their parents all knew about me and I’d get these horrible looks all the time. I’d always try to sneak in the last row of the church just before preaching started, then I’d duck right out of there as soon as service ended, so no one could give me a hard time. It always seemed to be that way. But there was just something about that church that sort of drew me. I never could quite figure what it was.”

“Every year we’d have this week of revival, you know—guest preacher comes in from somewhere, pulls

out his six best sermons and gets everyone fired up hotter than you know where. Well, I got there late, trying to sneak in the back row as usual, but the church was jammed, and I found myself pushed all the way up front. And there's the preacher right over me, a big man in a black frock coat, sunken eyes, and voice that sounded like it came straight from God. I was terrified. So there I sat through the whole service, squirming like a rat in a trap, feeling everybody's eyes burning into me, everyone knowing what I was. It was horrible. I couldn't wait to be out of there.

By now, Fred had put his knife and fork down and was leaning forward.

"Finally the preacher finished and he gave the benediction, and I started to slide into the center aisle hoping to make it to the back door before anyone got to me. Then all of a sudden I felt this great, bony hand on my shoulder, like a claw, and I turned around, scared half to death. And there's the preacher looking down at me, fixing me with those black eyes. He just stared at me for the longest time. He seemed to be looking for something, his face so close to mine, like he recognized something, while I squirmed under that great hand.

"'Ye...s!' he said, slowly. 'Yes . . . I know you' he paused, looking real intently. 'I know you,' he said louder. 'Why, you're—you're . . . *a child of God*. Go on, boy. Go and claim your inheritance.'"

They talked a bit more. And then the old man rose after a while, wished them well, and went on his way.

Fred said he just sat there, taking it all in, rolling the man's name around in his head—Ben Hooper was the name he'd given. Ben Hooper? Where had he heard that name before? And then it came to him. He remembered his mother telling him the story of a young man, still in his early forties who had become the two-time governor of Tennessee, named Ben Hooper.

Go . . . claim *your* inheritance! Amen