

**The Neighbor Within**  
Psalm 86 & Romans 13:8-10

*Third Week in Lent/ 7<sup>th</sup> March 2021*

A scribe of the Jewish Law once asked Jesus, “Which commandment is the first of all?” Jesus answered, “The first is, ‘Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ The second is this: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no greater commandment than these” (Mk. 10:28-31).

Love of God. We know something about this, although we’re not very good at it. Love for neighbor. We know something more about this, too, although we’re not very good at it. But what does it mean to love yourself? What does this kind of love look like?

But isn’t this selfish, to love yourself? Somehow along the way many have come to believe that to love one’s self is un-Christian, that the love of and care for one’s self is sinful. What is worse—and I’ve seen this a lot in my ministry—there are some who even operate with the twisted notion that as Christians we are supposed to hate and even loathe ourselves, discipleship involves removing any trace of the self. Perhaps this is due, in part, to a warped hearing of texts such as this one, “If any want to be my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it” (Luke 9:23-24). A misreading of this text has caused considerable damage to the psyche of countless Christians for centuries.

So what does it mean to love one’s self? We know something about what it’s like to love a spouse or partner, child or grandchild, to love our country or love a pet. But love toward self? That’s more difficult. What if we use other words, such as: *like*, *value*, *forgive*, *cherish*, *honor*, *accept*. What does it mean to like yourself? Or value, forgive, cherish, and honor yourself? What does it mean to accept yourself? What would that look like? What about being kind and compassionate toward yourself? What would that look like? What does it feel like?

We’re hitting some very sensitive areas, I know. We’re going into the depths of the self. And in the depths are shadowy parts that we have difficulty facing and acknowledging are there. These are important questions to explore because the capacity to love’s one neighbor is directly relate to the capacity to love one’s self.

You shall *like* your neighbor as you *like* yourself.  
But what if you don’t really like yourself? What then?

You shall *value* your neighbor as you *value* yourself.  
But what if you don’t really value yourself? What then?

You shall *forgive* your neighbor as you *forgive* yourself.  
But what if you can’t forgive yourself?

Can you cherish yourself, honor yourself? Honor, not just part of yourself or even most of yourself, but all of yourself.

You shall *accept* your neighbor as you *accept* yourself. But can you accept yourself? Not part of yourself. Not just your put-together-Sunday-self. Not the part you want people to see, but *all* of yourself. *All*. Can you?

We have many parts. There are parts that we allow to see the light of day and parts we place in shadow and lock away from the world and sometimes even from ourselves. They might be out of sight, but they're never, ever out of mind. It's the parts that we lock away or try to forget, that we don't want others to see or can't acknowledge to ourselves, that we generally have difficulty liking or valuing or honoring or cherishing. We all have parts of ourselves that we struggle to like or accept, there are parts we even despise and hate. Years ago, I came across a very wise saying that I use a lot. Sometimes I say it to myself or I remind someone who might need to hear it: "Be kind, for everyone is fighting a hard battle." You never know what someone is struggling with. Very often the ones who seem to have it all together, who appear "perfect," the ones obsessed with perfection and expect perfection from others, are often the ones who are hurting the most inside, but they can't accept that because that would mean admitting imperfection. We are divided creatures, we are divided deep within our heart of hearts and we know it.

The psalmist knew it. The psalms are remarkable in their ability to speak honestly, candidly about the human condition. Written from the heart, they offer an anatomy of the soul. The psalmist understands how painful it is to live with a divided heart, to be at odds with one's self and alienated from God, for neighbor. You can hear it particularly in Psalm 86:11, in this petition: "...give me an undivided heart to revere your name." He knows in his soul that he craves for healing, for a whole heart, for he knows that wholeheartedness enables him—enables us—to better praise and glorify God. *When we're wholehearted or undivided we're better able to perceive and receive God's love moving toward us and when we know this, we're free to praise and love and extend that love.* When we're divided there's always a part of us—the unacceptable, the sinful or shameful part—that doesn't feel worthy of God's love. This, then, only reinforces the division. It's like living in Sheol, meaning the place where we're cut off from God, with no personality, no strength, no life, living in shades, in shadow.

The psalmist, however, wants to worship God with his whole heart. When the psalmist, undivided, is open to God's love, *then* the soul knows that God is gracious. A divided self has difficulty believing, has difficulty trusting, has difficulty receiving grace, taking in the steadfast love of God, because one harbors a feeling that there is a part that is unlovable, unacceptable, unforgivable. That's the part we have difficulty accepting. Again and again, the psalmist affirms, indeed the Bible insists that *God is gracious and merciful*. "For great is your steadfast love toward me; you have delivered my soul from the depths of Sheol" (Ps. 86:13). Yet so many can never really "hear" such good news, can never receive this good news, receive this grace in one's heart.

And this is the good news: *God's favor toward us is real right now. We already have God's favor. We already dwell in God's favor. We don't have to earn it. We don't have to work*

toward it. Yet, there's something broken or distorted in the human psyche that can't quite accept or believe it or remains suspicious of it. In one of his greatest sermons, the theologian Paul Tillich (1886-1965) offered a piercing insight into the experience of grace. I first read the sermon, "[You Are Accepted](#)," when I was in college and it had a profound impact upon my life. Grace can and does strike us. Amidst our pain, our self-alienation, disgust, and self-hatred, when we are unable to fully embrace all of ourselves as God does, a wave of light breaks into the shadow and we begin to hear a voice deep within, deeper than the fearful, negative, critical voice of our egos. The Holy One whispers into the depths of our soul: "You are accepted. *You are accepted, accepted by that which is greater than you.... Simply accept the fact that you are accepted!*" Tillich writes, "If that happens to us, we experience grace. After such an experience we may not be better than before, and we may not believe more than before. But everything is transformed. In that moment, grace conquers sin, and reconciliation bridges the gulf of estrangement. And nothing is demanded of this experience, no religious or moral or intellectual presupposition, nothing but *acceptance*."<sup>1</sup> Accept your acceptance.

Our capacity to love ourselves, to like, to forgive, to accept ourselves is not selfish and it's not a sin. How can we not love what God loves, whom God loves? How can it be sinful when it's essential for us to love our neighbor or the stranger or the enemy or God? How can loving self be so wrong when so much depends upon it? Our ability to love neighbor and stranger flows through the capacity to love and accept ourselves, and the ability to love one's self is rooted in God's love for *every* part of ourselves. What if we imagine viewing ourselves the way God views us and live rooted and grounded in that relationship, in that space that love creates?<sup>2</sup> Dwelling in that love is the summation of the law, as Paul said, "Love your neighbor as yourself. Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law" (Romans 13:10).

In order to love neighbor, we need to look within. Not in a self-centered, egocentric, narcissistic way, but in a loving way turn our gaze inward. *If we're looking inward in a truly loving way, we will begin to look outward in a loving way. If we're not being loving toward ourselves, then don't be surprised if we have difficulty loving others.* Some Christians think of love as only self-giving love, sacrificial, other-focused, which sets self aside, sets personal concerns aside for the sake of others all the time. There are a lot of Christians out busy doing all kinds of good and necessary things, but their inner lives are wasting away; they're empty and hollow. It's surface Christianity. They're so outward-focused that they're not attentive to what's occurring within their hearts. As a result, there are a lot of tormented Christian souls around who can't hear the gospel and therefore can't really live it or share it. Or they're so bent on making everyone think they're Christian or doing the Christian "thing" in service, that they've never applied the same kind of love to themselves, the same kindness and compassion to themselves, the same kind of acceptance to themselves. I suspect this is one of the reasons some Churches can be so dysfunctional and toxic and cruel, and why some have experienced Christians as being a critical, judgmental, nasty group of people. We do to our neighbors what we do to ourselves. Contemporary writer David Dark likes to say, "There are so many ways to hate God."

So what do we do? How do we accept ourselves? How do we accept God's acceptance? It's through grace, of course. Grace is required. Grace allows us to accept our acceptance. Grace is already there. The Swiss psychiatrist Carl Jung (1875-1961) said, "The

most terrifying thing is to accept oneself completely.” He’s right. That’s why grace is required. It’s difficult. We can’t do this alone. We need help, we need grace. Personally, I believe self-acceptance, and the capacity to be loving toward one’s self, to love one’s self, to be among the critical issues facing us today. If you want to know what burdens my heart as a pastor, it’s this. It’s one of the most pressing ethical issues facing us as Christians, certainly not the only one of course, but it’s still important.

Speaking before a pastors conference in 1932, in Strasbourg, France, Carl Jung said, the “...acceptance of oneself is the essence of the whole moral problem and the acid test of one’s whole outlook on life.”<sup>3</sup> Speaking to clergy, he said those words, to the church, he spoke, speaking himself as one who knew his Bible, a child of the manse, the son of a pastor, descendant of generations of pastors, Jung was concerned about Christians who pride themselves on their good deeds and social virtues, their extraverted lives, but are reluctant to extend grace and compassion inward, toward accepting of one’s self. These words first spoken nearly ninety years ago are just as relevant today. Jung said to these pastors: “That I feed the hungry, that I forgive an insult, that I love my enemy in the name of Christ—all these are undoubtedly great virtues. What I do unto the least of my brethren, that I do unto Christ. But what if I should discover that the least among them all, the poorest of all the beggars, the most impudent of all the offenders, the very enemy himself—that these are within me, and that I myself stand in need of the alms of my own kindness—that I myself am the enemy who must be loved—what then?”<sup>4</sup> What then, indeed.

*In need of the alms of my own kindness, ...the one who deserves to be loved....*

Is this not also part of the Christian life? We have an ethical, moral obligation to ourselves and to the world—and to God—to do this work: to deepen the capacity to truly love one’s self. To receive God’s grace—and forgiveness and mercy. To hear the words of Christ from the cross, of forgiveness and mercy (Luke 23:34). And then extend the compassion of Christ, extend the kindness of Christ to one’s self, extend the peace of Christ to one’s self. For what we do to *this* “neighbor,” the neighbor within, we extend and project out upon the world and out to God and shape what love looks like.

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Tillich, “You Are Accepted,” *The Shaking of the Foundations* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1948), 162. The full text of the sermon may be found here:

[https://wedgeblade.net/files/archives\\_assets/20810.pdf](https://wedgeblade.net/files/archives_assets/20810.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> This is allusion to the hymn “Come Down, O Love Divine,” text written by Bianco da Siena, c. 1367: “For none can guess God’s grace, till Love creates a place wherein the Holy spirit makes a dwelling”

<sup>3</sup> Carl G. Jung, “Psychotherapists and the Clergy” in *The Collected Works of C. G. Jung, Vol. 11 - Psychology and Religion* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1958), par. 520.

<sup>4</sup> Jung, par. 520. The quote continues, “Then, as a rule, the whole truth of Christianity is reversed: there is then no more talk of love and long-suffering; we say to the brother within us ‘Raca,’ [Aramaic=nothing, foolish, unworthy. See Mt. 5:22] and condemn and rage against ourselves. We hide him from the world, we deny ever having met this least among the lowly in ourselves, and had it been God himself who drew

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near to us in this despicable form, we should have denied him a thousand times before a single cock had crowed.”