
Loving Yourself

Matthew 22.34-46

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on October 26, 2008 by the Revd Dr Sam Wells

You're on the phone. The conversation's getting pretty intense. The voice says, "I need you to come." You pause. You say, "I'm sorry, I can't come right now." The voice says, "But you said you didn't have plans for this weekend." You pause a bit longer, on a knife edge between emotional exhaustion and nagging guilt. You say, "I'm sorry, I need a bit of time to myself." "Okay," says the voice, bitterly. "I get the message." Ouch. Nagging guilt wins again.

I'm taking a hunch that you've had that phone call. And you know that tussle between nagging guilt and emotional exhaustion. After the words "Okay, I get the message," the trump card, spoken or unspoken, is "I thought you were supposed to be a Christian."

Because being a Christian is taken to mean "permanently open to emotional exhaustion, physical burnout, psychological manipulation, and relentless guilt." Prepared to go to any lengths, in fact, to avoid being called "selfish." 200 years ago the French philosopher Auguste Comte coined the term "altruism." Altruism means living a life for others. Since then a great many people have assumed altruism was what Christianity was really all about. It may have been Comte that C.S. Lewis was thinking of when he said of a fellow parishioner, "She spent all her life doing good to others. You could tell the others by their hunted look." We all know people who seem to say, "Because I'm worn out being so noble to others, that makes it okay for me to be short-tempered, mean, and ungenerous to you." Altruism assumes that in order to love others more, you need to love yourself less. It takes love to be a zero-sum game, where if you give in one place you have to take away somewhere else. This is a grim view of the world in which someone always has to suffer, and love means that that someone should be you.

When you're on the phone to the person who wants more from you than you can give, the assumption is there's only two options – altruism or selfishness. I want to see how Jesus' words in today's gospel help us with that phone call by introducing us to something called self-love. Jesus is asked, "which commandment in the law is the greatest?" And he replies, "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." I want to isolate the key words in this answer: God, neighbor, self, and love. What Jesus' words show us is that we can't grasp what it means to love *ourselves* appropriately until we've got a sense of *God* and *neighbor*.

Let's start with God. Jesus says "Love the *Lord your God*." Every word counts. This isn't a distant abstract God who set the universe in motion and then took a long lunch break. This is the *Lord*. That's the God whose name was so holy they couldn't say it out loud, whose face was so wondrous they couldn't look upon it, whose heart was so passionate they wrote book after book about his constancy in the face of Israel's faltering response. And this Lord is *your* God. The whole gospel is in that little word *your*. Your God means the God who shaped his whole life to be in relationship with you, not just in the good times but when you've completely messed up and when it's all shocking and embarrassing and humiliating and sad. Have you ever heard a tiny child scream out the words Daddy or Mummy at the top of his or her voice in a moment of pure joy or need matched by complete confidence that his or her parent is entirely present and entirely devoted to him or her? We're as close to God as that child to that parent. That's the power of the word *your*. Jesus doesn't talk about God, he talks about the *Lord your God*.

And that brings us to the word neighbor. When elsewhere Jesus is asked the famous question, "Who is my neighbor?" we immediately sense the panic that the command to love is simply an invitation to be overwhelmed. We're not sure if the neighbor means the regular people we encounter, the poor, the enemy, or the whole wide world. It sounds like a recipe for either naïve sentimentalism or manic burnout. The political right talks about responsibility for individual neighbors but that sounds like shorthand for lowering taxes. The

political left talks as if loving your neighbor is something you can arrange for the government to do on your behalf.

The trouble is, because we're unclear about these words God and neighbor we have no idea what to say about our selves. To use academic jargon, you could say the project of modernity is to create a freestanding self that doesn't need God or neighbor. How's this project going? I wonder. Well, despite airport bookshops crammed with self-help manuals, limitless advice on what diet and activities will benefit your toddler, and a reduction in the chronic wars and famines and diseases that used to keep earlier generations busy, we don't seem to have got any happier. With increasing affluence, we have fewer things to blame for the confused selves that we still have. So we blame... our parents. As the poet Philip Larkin points out, our parents make a mess of our lives: "They may not mean to, but they do. They fill you with the faults they had And add some extra, just for you." Our parents can't escape: if it's nature, it's their genes that we blame; if it's nurture, we simply blame their being too strict or too lenient, too distant or too smothering. They only have one resort: they get to blame their own parents. In some cases this turns out to be a watertight excuse. But having someone to blame isn't a solution to the problem of self-love. It's just a sign that the project of creating a self that doesn't need God or neighbor isn't going too well.

So what has Christianity to say on the subject? For Christians, God and neighbor come as a package deal in the figure of Jesus. Jesus shows us what God looks like, the *Lord* God, whose life is shaped to be with us, the *Lord our* God, who's as close to us as a mother to her baby. And Jesus shows us what our neighbor looks like. The Good Samaritan parable comes alive when we realize it is *Jesus* who was beaten and bruised and left to die. That's what the cross did – it left Jesus dying by the side of the road, it made Jesus our neighbor. And it is *us* who walk past on the other side, then and now. When Jesus says, whatever you did for the hungry, the naked, the prisoner, you did for me, he is showing us himself in our neighbor. So when Jesus says "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind... And you shall love your neighbor as yourself," *he* is the Lord our God, and *he* is our neighbor.

And so there's only one place to go to form an understanding of our selves. There's only one place to stand, and that's face to face with Jesus. You're not your wallet, you're not your house, you're not your car, you're not your GPA – you're not even your family. You're what Jesus thinks of you, because Jesus is God, and Jesus is your neighbor. You can never fully know yourself, but you can be fully known: Jesus knows you better than you know yourself. Jesus is hurt by thoughtless things you never knew you'd done, and delighted by unconscious gestures you never realized you'd made. He understands the fear that makes you cruel and the joy that makes you generous. He rejoices in the very thrill of your existence, is tender and close to you when you are curved in on yourself, is overjoyed in the very moment of your repentance, is exultant as you spread your wings to fly in his Spirit. Jesus is the heart within your heart. And he adores you.

If none of this were true, of course we'd be selfish. Selfishness says, "No one's looking out for me, so I'd better take as much as I can while I can so I have plenty for when things turn bad." Selfishness says, "The truth about me is terrible, so I'm going to get all I can and pig out all I can until someone finds out the truth about me and the game's up." Selfishness isn't a sign of too much self-love: it's quite the opposite. It's a sign of profound insecurity. It's a moment of panic that says there's no eternal assurance and so I must grab and go. As a pastor, when I see a person acting in a way that seems deeply selfish, I try to ask them, "Is this really what you want? Is this really making you happy?" And usually the answer is no. And amazingly often there are tears. And I see it as an opportunity more often for compassion than for condemnation.

For those of you who've always been told that you should live for others and always put others before yourself or risk being called selfish, here's a word of advice. When you hear the words "Love your neighbor as yourself," swap the words round and say, "Love yourself as your neighbor." In other words, regard yourself as the first among all the neighbors God calls you to love. God's got a lot to be doing with his whole creation, but the wonderful thing is, he's chosen to start with you. The language of altruism never really grasps this. It makes loving others seem impossibly hard work, because it assumes that you have to choose between loving yourself and loving others. But God loves every one of us while still loving each of us as if we were the only one. We're able to love others because of the way God loves us. And to accept that love, we have to learn to love ourselves.

I wonder if you've ever served meals in a restaurant or a café or even to a large family. You know how a meal can be ruined if the person serving it is crotchety or distracted or generally in a bad mood. Well if you're that person, it pays to eat at least a small snack or meal earlier yourself so you're exactly in the right frame of mind to serve a meal to others. If you're tummy's rumbling or your tongue's hanging out as you serve up the supper you aren't going to be much help to your guests. You love others best by loving yourself first. And think of the way you pray. So many of us have been told to pray the way we serve food, to pray for everyone else first and leave ourselves till last. The trouble is we've usually got something huge on our mind that stops us concentrating on anyone else. Much better to pray for yourself first, get it out and done, and then wholeheartedly get on with laying out before God the people we know in distress and the passion and pain around them.

This is the work of self-love: to let yourself be loved by Jesus, and to be so energized and transformed by that love, that you love yourself as the first among all the countless neighbors God calls you to love. To learn to be their friend, you practice by being your own friend. You don't resent those neighbors, because they're not taking away anything that belongs to you. You've already been looked after, because after being loved by Jesus, there's nothing more to want. By contrast if you're looking elsewhere to bolster your self-regard I've got bad news for you: it'll never be enough. It'll be like pouring water into a jug with a leak at the bottom. Of course that's exhausting. In that economy, looking after yourself is bound to take away from looking after others. But when the love of Jesus has made you something and someone you never dared imagine you could be, has made you beautiful despite your blemishes, has made you good despite your betrayals, has made you true despite your lies, then self-love is simply a happy introduction to a story that isn't finally about you.

Let's go back to that phone call. Remember, the best way I can to teach you to love *yourself* is to love *myself*, because being a Christian requires me to love myself as I love you. We left the call where you say, "I'm sorry, I need a bit of time to myself." "Okay," says the voice, bitterly. "I get the message. ... I thought you were supposed to be a Christian." Maybe this is what your friend needs to hear: "If you go on like this, in your insecurity, looking anxiously for appreciation, you're going to make yourself and others miserable. You'll live in the wilderness, wandering unhappily, searching desperately for the affirmation that never sufficiently comes. You'll be a nomad, demanding from everyone, yet belonging nowhere. You're greedily seeking attention for yourself and when you don't get it you're calling people names for not satisfying your limitless demands. The truth is, I can't give you what you most deeply need. You're asking something from me that only God can give.

"And God is longing to give it to you. You've tried to build yourself up on your own strength and on other people's approval. It's not working. Maybe it's time you learned to accept that God adores you. God knows you inside out and yet he still adores you. If you can only accept that then you won't be looking for affirmation and approval from me and others like me all the time. You'll begin to see yourself as God sees you, gloriously made, profoundly confused, but bursting with gifts and delights. You'll stop looking relentlessly for rewards and recognition. You'll discover that the kingdom of heaven is yours. You'll never be an exile, and never be in the wilderness. You'll be everywhere at home. And you'll have nothing that you weren't longing to share with friend and stranger. Most of all this good news.

"Speak to you after the weekend."