

Belovedness

Sermon for the 24th Sunday after Pentecost, October 31, 2021

Readings: Deuteronomy 6:1-9; Psalm 119:1-8; Hebrews 9:11-14; Mark 12:28-34

Sermon text: 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 other commandment greater than these.”

Love God with all you got, and love everyone else the way you love yourself. Seems simple.

And it would be great if we could perfectly fulfill these two great commandments. As our psalmist writes in the beginning of Psalm 119, a long song of praise to the Torah:

- 1 Happy are they whose way is blameless, *
 who walk in the law of the Lord!
- 2 Happy are they who observe his decrees *
 and seek him with all their hearts!
- 3 Who never do any wrong, *
 but always walk in his ways.
- 5 Oh, that my ways were made so direct *
 that I might keep your statutes!
- 6 Then I should not be put to shame, *
 when I regard all your commandments.

But our ways are not made so direct. I hate to admit it but there it is. Humanity is made of crooked timber, as Immanuel Kant put it, tending toward envy, injustice and violence. Scripture calls it humanity’s evil inclination: “the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually” (Gen 6:5), and “the inclination of the human heart is evil from youth” (Gen 8:21). We are not perfect and our ways will be never be made so direct that we can perfectly fulfill the commandments. Sorry psalmist.

Well, if we are imperfect, sinful, guilty, we might as well admit it—and we do. Later in the service, as we do every week, we will confess that we have not loved God with our whole heart and we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves. And not in a general way but in a million small and large particular ways. and not only our personal selves. But we are implicated in all sorts of corporate and historic sins. As a recent version of the general confession words it: “We repent of the evil that enslaves us, the evil we have done, and the evil done on our behalf.”

OK, so we’re not perfect. We are in fact guilty. Should we also be ashamed?

I think here it is helpful to use a distinction between shame and guilt made by the social psychologist and popular author and speaker Brené Brown: guilt is “holding something we’ve done or failed to do up against our values and feeling psychological discomfort.” Whereas shame is the feeling or experience “of believing that we are flawed and therefore unworthy of love and belonging.”

So a feeling of guilt when truly guilty is helpful; it shows us that our lives and values are out of alignment. We need to work to remedy the situation, whether that is a case of personal guilt (you said something unkind or did something against your moral standards and you need to make amends) or corporate, (as in the much-discussed case of those with white skin benefitting from a history which has favored those with white skin over those with dark skin—which we know is unjust and needs to be remedied. How is a much more difficult question—but acknowledging the historical truth is a start).

But shame is a different sort of thing, this “feeling or experience of feeling inherently unworthy of love and belonging.” On a personal level it leads to fear of being excluded, of people disliking you if they really knew you, of trying to fit in, or, conversely, of armoring up and rejecting emotional closeness and vulnerability. and of course on a corporate level it can lead people to regard entire classes or race or genders as somehow inherently better or worse than others—which is crazy wrong. Nobody should be ashamed of their skin color, or of any other aspect of how God made them—each of us, a distinct, wonderfully made creation.

But, according to Brown, it is almost universal that people struggle with shame and feelings of unworthiness. (Except for those who don’t even feel guilt when guilty—and that pathology is a different story.) But in her research she she has found some people who escape shame through what she calls whole-heartedness (hmmm, that rings a bell: we are called to love God with all our whole heart and our neighbor as ourself). Wholehearted people live from a deep sense of worthiness, have therefore the courage to be imperfect, authentic and vulnerable—which makes true belonging possible. Whole hearted people go out into the social world with courage and vulnerability—being the first to say I love you, being willing to confront the bully, being able to admit your guilt and apologize.

The tricky part is the struggle to become wholehearted. And I worry a bit about the many folks who try and try to follow teachers like Brown, attending workshops, buying self-help books, and really working on themselves, as they say. A very good thing, but what happens if the old crooked timber bends and evil inclination creep back in. If we revert to bad habits. do we then feel even more shame? Do some self-help efforts engender a cycle of pride in our accomplishments followed by shame for our backsliding? Is the very attempt to become better a sort of perfectionism? And as Brown herself colorfully puts it: “When perfectionism is driving us, shame is always riding shotgun.”

Well, first of all, I applaud the effort to be better, to follow the commandments and moral teachings of the church or other wise and good teachers (And brown has a new book about to be published which sounds good: *An Atlas of the Heart*). And even if we are bound to come up short, we may get better. As in the case of the mean old codger who used to come to church, criticize the preacher, complain about the service, make fun of people—and put little in the plate. when confronted with his poor showing he would say, well, you should have seen me before I became a Christian.

But another, and I think better way to think about our inherent worthiness is embedded in our faith. As we read in Genesis chapter one, male and female we are made in the image of God. And the New Testament tells us that if we want to see the image of God fully fleshed out, as it were, we look to Jesus who is the very image and imprint of God in human form (Col 1:15; Hebrews 1:3).

When Jesus arose from the baptismal waters of the Jordan he heard a voice from heaven say, “This is my Son, the Beloved.” Henri Nouwen writes, “This is the decisive moment of Jesus' life. His true identity is declared to him. He is the Beloved of God. As 'the Beloved' he is being sent into the world so that through him all people will discover and claim their own **belovedness**. Everything that Jesus said or did came forth from that most intimate spiritual communion. Jesus' revealed to us that we sinful, broken human beings are invited to that same communion that Jesus lived, that we are the beloved sons and daughters of God just as he is the Beloved Son, that we are sent into the world to proclaim the **belovedness** of all people as he was and that we will finally escape the destructive powers of death as he did.” (from *Life of the Beloved, Spiritual Living in a Secular World*).

So there it is. we are indeed sinful and broken—made of crooked timber—but we are also beloved children of God. Inherently worthy, not for what we did or will do, but because God is full of grace and love. And what God has given God would like us to share. Show some love. As much as you can. Love God. Love your neighbor. And love yourself. Be whole hearted.

In Christ's name, amen.

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