

To That Persons Own Self Be True

Rachel Callender

Matthew 22:34-40

26 July 2020

Medford UMC; NJ

Prayer of Illumination

Almighty God, in you are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. Open our eyes that we may see the wonders of your Word; and give us grace that we may clearly understand and freely choose the way of your wisdom; through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Sermon Manuscript

I've often struggled with Shakespeare's play *Hamlet*. If you're unfamiliar with it, you may have at least seen shows alluding to it with a guy holding a skull asking it, "To be or not to be?" Don't get me wrong, it's a beautiful play with a lot of nuances to keep you thinking. If you ever get the chance to see it, I totally recommend you do. But early on in the play, a character named Polonius offers one of Shakespeare's most famous lines, he says, "To thine own self be true". It's a lovely quote that people use often: I've seen it on bumper stickers, as signs hanging in stores, even as tattoos.

But in our modern, individualist, western mindset, it tends to be used nowadays as a "Be Yourself" kind of mindset. "Who cares what everyone else thinks? Who cares if people won't like you for it, Be you!" And this is great, right? Definitely be yourself, (I'm not saying don't be yourself), but when we contextualize that snippet of text into the broader play, it's meaning shifts.

Stay with me: Polonius's family appears to be an ideal family unit, but they are far from it. He doesn't want his son going to Paris, so he's trying to stall him. While doing so, he says:

This above all: to thine own self be true,
And it must follow, as the night the day,
Thou canst not then be false to any man.

"Thou canst not then be false to any man." It's said out of irony, right? He's currently deceiving his son. But it's that line that catches my attention: there's an important relational aspect into being true to yourself, into having a strong sense of self. He's saying to be honest in your relations with others, that we have a better understanding of ourselves when we do what we can *for* and with others.

Let's be honest, being honest to our neighbors doesn't always mean being kind. Where does loving others and ourselves play into that? What if you don't have a strong sense of self?

In today's scripture text, Jesus is asked by a religious legal expert, so most likely a rabbi, what, out of all the many commandments God has given, is the greatest one. Jesus actually gives probably one of the most straight-forward answers that he offers in the whole Bible, he says that the greatest commandment is to love God with everything you are.

Got it.

A preacher once said:

"The Bible says that we were created as an object of God's love. God made us to love us. God made you because He loves to love you. He wants to have a relationship with you. That means that you are created for the purpose of

having a relationship and, as a result, the most important thing you can KNOW in life is that God loves you. And the most important thing you can DO in life is to love God back. Jesus said it like this in Matthew 22: 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment.' Nothing is more important. If you do this you will fulfill your primary purpose in life. If you learn to love God and let God love you, your life has fulfilled its meaning, its purpose. If you miss this part of your life, your life is a failure. Because you've missed the very reason that God created you and put you on this earth - to love and be loved by God."

The idea that everyone's primary purpose is to love and be loved, and that all other vocations and callings come after that comforts me. Author and theologian, C.S. Lewis once said, "A person's spiritual health is exactly proportional to their love for God."

God in and of Gods-self is relational. The Trinity, God three-in-one, God *is* relationship.

It's first important though to clear up the use of the word "love" here. We've all experienced some sort of love in one way or another, it's extremely difficult to describe and, to muddy this up even more, there's a subjectivity to love. My understanding and experience with love is going to be different than yours.

The Greeks have actually beat us to the punch on this. They have many different words for "love" that all mean something different: there's one word for a romantic love, another for the

love of friends and family, and a completely different word for the one used here which means more of an outward, humble devotion. That word is used both when referring to our loving God and for Jesus' next line about loving our neighbors. He doesn't say to love God with this humble devotion but you're your neighbor like a friend or family member - No - He says to treat others with the same love you offer God.

We might be in trouble here.

If Jesus had just stopped at the "love God" part, we might be doing just fine, but no, now we have to offer that same love to everyone else. EVERYONE else. That's definitely not an easy thing to do. I don't know about you, but I definitely fail at this daily.

Though this is from a Gospel text, this isn't a purely Christian thought. Jesus is quoting the Torah, the first 5 books of the Old Testament. Deuteronomy chapter 6 reads, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your being, and all your strength."

Sounds familiar.

Jesus continues this way. Leviticus chapter 19 reads, "You must not take revenge nor hold a grudge against any of your people; instead, you must love your neighbor as yourself; I am the Lord."

Once again, sounds familiar.

Two weeks ago, when I preached from another Matthew text about the "Great Commission" one thing I didn't point out about that text is that Jesus never calls it "great", we do. Today's text, "The Great Commandment" is the only thing He calls "great". So, though Christ asked something of us in that other

text, though God asks many things of God's children, what it all comes down to isn't obedience, or service, or moral behavior. It's love, plain and simple. That's all that's actually being asked of us.

This morning, though, I want to focus on where Jesus says to love our neighbors *as ourselves*. That's very different than just loving people, we have to have a real, solid sense of self-love first. If we are made in the image of God, then to love God "with all our heart and all our soul", we actually, properly have to love ourselves. We have to love who we are in relation to others. "Thou canst not then be false to any man."

In theatre school, one of the first things I was taught to do when I was cast in a show, was to read the play and mark down all the information I could get about my character into three different categories:

Who they are.

Who they think they are.

What they have in common with others.

To truly understand the self, we have to be relational. Who we are and who we understand ourselves to be are not necessarily the same. Who we think we are and who others think we are, are not necessarily the same; and if you're anything like me, you're very hard on yourself - probably for things that are out of your control, or aren't really that bad, or maybe even from a misunderstanding about yourself. So how does "To thine own self be true" work if I don't have a proper sense of self? True to what? If I'm hard on-myself, I'll most likely be hard on others too.

If we are truly made in God's image, then when we put ourselves down, when we don't offer ourselves that same grace that we know God offers us, when we're tough on the *image* of God - what does that say about how we actually feel about God?

During this pandemic, there has been a lot of encouragement for people online about not being hard on themselves: not blaming yourself for having trouble getting all your work done, for not reading tons of books, for not exercising or cleaning more. Quarantine, fear of getting sick, fear of losing a loved one, fear to reengage with the world as businesses open back up, take a strong emotional toll.

Perhaps before this pandemic hit, you were already entering into a tough season due to loss or grief or a big change - and then this hits! Of course it's going to be tough to feel motivated, of course its going to be tough have a sense of normalcy when nothing is as it was, of course it's going to be tough to sleep. Of course! But when we're hard on ourselves for this, without meaning to, we project that judgement onto others. It spreads.

I'll give you an example: I've mentioned at some of the Rachel meet-and-greets that I was born with a severe speech impediment. Yes, I see the oddity of that since I basically speak for a living. But the speech impediment was a result of being born with a class-3 malocclusion, which is a fancy way of saying a severe, asymmetrical underbite. As a result, I couldn't pronounce just about every letter in the alphabet plus "sh", "ch", and "th". My lisp was horrible. Even chewing food was a challenge. I was painfully quiet because I hated speaking

because I was constantly criticized, not for what I was saying but for how I sounded when I said it.

After 14 years of speech therapy, the last teacher handed my parents back their money and said, "She can't improve until doctors surgically fix this". At 19, I did get orthognathic surgery, which is a medical surgery of upper and lower jaw reconstruction. It's as extensive as it sounds. I couldn't go to school or work for months and my mouth was wired shut for weeks. As a result, as you can imagine, my weight plummeted. I also cut 14 inches off my hair before entering back into the world and my face was very minorly altered. It became a little more symmetrical from centering and moving back the lower jaw.

I tell you all this because the way people responded to me once I went back to college taught me a lot about how someone's own priorities and insecurities about themselves speaks to what they see and judge in others.

The people who commented on my hair were people who typically cut and dyed their hair often, the people who constantly complained about humidity causing frizz or those who wished their hair were curlier or straighter. It was something they prioritized in themselves or maybe even didn't like about themselves.

Others, usually my actor friends who were very self-conscious about their appearance, commented on my weight-loss. Others, typically those who seemed to put little thought into appearances, simply said that there was something different that they just couldn't put their finger on.

Why is this important? The things we don't like about ourselves, the ways we put ourselves down, feeds into the way we

think, feel, act, speak to others. If we're harsh on ourselves for our bodies, our wits, our generosity; then we'll extend that same criticism to others.

They say that when someone is mean to you, it's actually because they're insecure. I think there's something important to remember about that.

To truly love our neighbor in a beautiful, Christ-like way, means that we have to be actively working to love ourselves as God loves us, in a an unapologetically gracious way.

We need to be prioritizing Sabbath and be really thinking about it as a gift, particularly in this culture that applauds over-working.

We need to be speaking kindly about ourselves. Replace words of criticism into words of growth. Recognize where you are compared to where you've been, not where you want to be.

We need to "fail" gracefully. Turns out theatre school offered me a lot of helpful tools for ministry: because my first day at my first theatre school what we did is we each, individually had to stand center stage in front of everyone, bow and say "I failed". It's something I've held onto since.

We hear a lot of sermons and read a lot of scripture about not being arrogant, and that's wonderful. We also, though, need to hear that we should love all of God's creation, ourselves included. That by truly seeing ourselves as made in God's image, we can see that in others also.

To Thine Own Self Be True

Thou Canst Not Then Be False to Any Man.