

30 May 2021

On Giving Yourself

John 13:34-35; 15:12-13

At his final meal with his disciples, Jesus knew it was his last chance to teach his disciples, so he told them what was most important. We read from John's gospel, chapter 13, verses 34-35, and chapter 15, verses 12-13:

^{13:34}I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. ³⁵By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.'

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^{15:12}'This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. ¹³No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends.'

Last week I talked about a central paradox of Jesus' teaching, that those who seek to find themselves will lose themselves, but those who deny themselves will find themselves. And, as counterintuitive as it sounds, we saw that in many cases it seems to work exactly as Jesus said. When we set out in our own power and discernment on a journey of self-discovery, what our limited imaginations tend to settle on is some group to model ourselves after. Thus in seeking our individuality, we conform ourselves to others. On the other hand, we saw that many of those who deny their Selves, putting others before themselves as Jesus did, do in fact become striking individuals.

But that last part doesn't always seem to work, does it? I have met some who denied themselves in every conceivable way but only became invisible. I'm thinking specifically of one woman I know of my mother's generation who denied herself everything for the sake of her husband. What he said was law. If he interrupted her when she was talking, she hushed and turned her attention to him. If he planned things over her prior commitments, she rearranged her schedule. She cooked what he liked, went where he chose for vacations, deferred to him in every area. By the end, I'm not sure she was capable of forming an opinion on her own. And then he died, and she had no idea who she was. In denying herself, she lost herself. So I have to qualify the whole "deny yourself" thing. It matters *why* you deny yourself. People who deny themselves out of fear or because they don't think they have any choice are not taking up their cross and following Christ; they are victims of abuse. The sort of self-denial that Christ modeled for us was not under constraint: he denied himself freely, simply because he loved us.

So let's talk about love, because that involves another – similar – paradox. I mentioned this last week but it's worth looking at in its own right. Not only do we *find* ourselves by denying ourselves, but we learn to *love* ourselves by turning our love outward toward others. As I said last week, we cannot learn to love ourselves by trying to do so; when we turn all our attention to ourselves, we only end up making ourselves less lovable even to ourselves. And this isn't hard to illustrate. Simply look at the extreme case of those who love themselves exclusively: narcissists. And here I'm not using the word casually, to refer to someone who is vain or selfish. We're all that sometimes. I'm speaking in the clinical sense of those with Narcissistic Personality Disorder. These people genuinely care only about themselves, their own needs and desires and importance. Other people exist for them only in terms of whether and to what extent they serve the

narcissists' needs. That is, other people are either obstacles to crush or tools to use. They have no independent value. Moreover, pathological narcissists believe that everyone else sees the world the same way, as the same sort of battle for supremacy. Thus they are incapable of gratitude. They never give gifts unless they expect to get something greater in return, so they assume that anything that is given to them has strings attached. They do not admire compassion or charity, and when they see someone being charitable, they wonder what that person's angle is. What are they really after? Nor do they admire heroism – why would people risk their lives for others? What's in it for them? They must have been chumps. And so on. I don't need to go into more detail. Here's the point: a narcissist does not experience love. People may *try* to love narcissists – their mothers, maybe – but it bounces off. Narcissists are immune. Any love that is given to them is received either with suspicion or as a sign of weakness. Certainly no love is returned, and where there is no mutuality, there is no love.

This has been a long example, but I think you see my point. We are only able to experience love to the extent that we open our hearts and love others. Until we ourselves know what it's like to love someone else to the point of sacrificing our own desires for that person's sake, we are not able to comprehend that someone else might love us that way. Only those who love others are open to being loved; therefore, only those who are loved by others can learn to love themselves. Love is like a bright light shining on a sheet of white paper and a sheet of black paper. The white sheet lights up, but the black sheet does not. The difference is not because of any difference in the light itself but only in the nature of the surface. One is able to receive and reflect the light, and the other is not.

By the way, this is connected to another question, which is important, so let me digress for a minute. In Matthew 6:14-15, Jesus says, *For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.* This isn't the only place Jesus says this. He has a whole parable about a servant who didn't forgive a minor debt, so he wasn't forgiven a major debt, and we repeat a form of this teaching every time we say the Lord's Prayer – *as we forgive those who trespass against us.* But this teaching has always bothered me, and I'm sure I haven't been alone. Well, think about it. We talk about how God loves us unconditionally and will forgive us all our sins, but this passage makes God's forgiveness conditional. It seems to say that if we don't fully forgive everyone who has harmed us, then we're disqualified from grace. It's not just that that feels legalistic and bureaucratic, as if there's some angel in charge of tracking whether we've forgiven our school bullies or the jerk at the office who cost us the raise and reporting back to God, it's also that that just doesn't sound like the God that we find in the rest of the Bible. Psalm 104: "As far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us." It doesn't add, "unless he finds out you've been holding a grudge against your ex. In that case, never mind."

But there's another way to look at it. Forgiveness, I think, is like love. Indeed, I would say that forgiveness is a subset of love. And just as we make ourselves receptive to love by loving others, we make ourselves receptive to forgiveness by forgiving others. It isn't that God *refuses* to forgive us if we are unforgiving, but rather that God's forgiveness has nothing to hang onto on the unforgiving soul, so it slides off. I know that's not exactly how Matthew 6 reads, but it makes this odd passage fit better within the rest of Christ's teaching. In Matthew 7:2, for example, he says, *For with the judgment you make you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get.* When we open our hearts and empty out our resentments by

forgiving others, we clear space that God's forgiveness of us can fill, and the more space we clear, the more room we make. Forgiving others is, in a sense, practicing for being forgiven. It's a stretching exercise for the soul.

So anyway, back to the main topic, love. As I've been saying, the beginning point is not to love ourselves but to love others. Like forgiveness, this takes time and practice. We start by loving those who love us, which for most of us means our parents and family. Then we spread our love a little wider to cover friends and acquaintances, and then eventually we get to the point we can love those whom we don't know personally but whom we empathize with because they share certain things with us: people from our tribe – however we define it. The process goes on, though. We can then learn to love those who are *not* like us, who are from different tribes, and eventually even those who *do* not like us. Not everyone reaches that level, but at least we have an example of how to get there: Christ. In our scripture today we read from two different places where Jesus explained it. John 13, *Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.* And in John 15, *This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.* Love like Jesus loved, and never settle for anything less. And how much is that?

No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. So now we've come full circle. Once again, if we deny ourselves, we find ourselves. If we love others, we experience love ourselves. The more we love others, the more room we have to know God's love. I know that isn't how our minds normally operate, but that says less about love than about the limitations of our own minds. Love others. Expand your categories of love. And know that you are loved.

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A final word. This is Memorial Day weekend, when we remember those who died in our armed forces fighting under our flag. We liberal mainline Christians, who tend to be suspicious of war, are sometimes a little ambivalent about this holiday. But we shouldn't be. On this day we don't celebrate the wars – some of which have indeed been unjust – but we celebrate men and women of courage, who denied themselves, to the point of laying down their lives. Until we figure out a way to end war, and I'm not holding my breath, then our lives and safety depend on such men and women of courage. We *can* honor those who gave themselves for others. Indeed we must.