Invitation to the Table

As Jesus stood at the edge of the wilderness at the beginning of 40 days of temptation, we stand at the edge of the Lenten season at the beginning of 40 days of self-examination. Lent challenges us to look within ourselves and examine the priorities in our lives and how those priorities have influenced our choices.

It is a daunting task to be totally honest with ourselves; to refuse the temptation of self-deception, to acknowledge the love that accepts us as we are, and to surrender to the grace that will not leave us as we are, but will enable us to grow until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ.

Here at the table we receive bread for the wilderness, wine for the journey.

Our hymn of communion is #491, “As Grain on Scattered Hillside.”

Pastoral Prayer

"As Yourself: Six Habits that Inhibit Self-Belief"

MATTHEW 22:34-40 (NRSVUE) ***When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, [35]and one of them, an expert in the law, asked him a question to test him. [36]"Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" [37]He said to him, "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' [38]This is the greatest and first commandment. [39]And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' [40]On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets."***
The Word of God for the people of God.

How much are you worth? Look down. You've got two legs. Would you take a million dollars apiece and sell your legs for medical research? (No!)

Hold up your arms. Wave your hands. Would you take a million bucks apiece and sell your arms for medical research? (No!)

See? You're already worth $4 million, and we've barely begun the inventory!

There's a thin but significant line between self-esteem and narcissism; between self-love and self-centeredness; between self-belief and selfishness.

In today's reading, Jesus quotes part of the Shema—the Jewish statement of faith. It was not written in an all-day retreat—people breaking into small discussion groups with lots of newsprint on the wall, producing statements for the back of the bulletin. It was directly from Scripture.

Late in the 7th Century BCE, Josiah was King of Judah. The temple had fallen into disrepair, and he ordered its restoration. Workers found a book and brought it to him. In II Kings 22 and II Chronicles 34, it's called "The Book of the Law," possibly an early version of Deuteronomy. When it was read to the king, he realized how far Israel had strayed from the faith and initiated a great reform movement.

As part of that reform, the book we know as Leviticus likely was written or edited from an earlier writing to be used as a resource in training the priesthood. It is organized as three sermons attributed to Moses about the true way to worship YHWH in contrast to pagan worship in the fertility cults that surrounded Judah.

It is from these two books that Jesus chose the greatest commandment: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might" (Deuteronomy 6:4), and the second is like it, "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Leviticus 19:17—sometime this week read that whole 19th chapter of Leviticus. Compare it to some of the ethical standards that define our culture today. Interesting stuff.)

There's no lack of clarity, no wiggle room to squeeze in our human biases and doctrines. For Matthew's Jesus, any thought or action that fails to reflect love of God or of neighbor is a contradiction of the foundation of all the law and the prophets. These two commandments become the key to interpreting all divine revelation.

A lot of sermons, articles, lessons, and even books have been written about loving God and loving your neighbor. But how many sermons have you heard about that last phrase, "as yourself?" Even Fred Craddock and Gene Boring in my go-to commentary slide right over it.

In that two-word prepositional phrase, Jesus sets the standard for loving one's neighbor; and I think we can come in the back door and say most acts that fail to demonstrate love of neighbor are anchored in an equal failure to love oneself.

Jesus encountered demons: twisted bodies, distorted minds, curved spines, blind eyes, drooling chins, speechless throats… forces hostile to the love of God: twisting, distorting, disrupting, dividing, hurting, confusing… Truth doesn't always come bound in leather with red letters printed in King James English. Through the years, caring humans have used the gift of human intellect to understand those forces: where they come from, what causes them to emerge, how to counteract them. Psychology has become an effective tool in applying gifts of discernment and healing, even when the psychologist doesn't acknowledge the spiritual origin of those gifts. One of psychology's greatest contributions to human life has been to identify one of our demons, anxiety, as the #1 issue blocking self-actualization and self-love.

In my pastoral counselling, and in my general awareness—especially since the emergence of social media—stress is undoubtedly the strongest source of dysfunction in our culture. Natasha Reynolds, a Toronto therapist, is quoted in a Huffpost article last September:[1]

> "In some ways, anxiety is like a smoke alarm that alerts you to danger and allows you to get out of your home safely, but it also alerts you to things that aren't actually dangerous, like how a smoke alarm can go off over a piece of burnt toast.
>
> "When that smoke alarm goes off frequently to things that aren't dangerous, it can be a sign to seek support and develop tools to navigate this stress response."

In that article, and through years of study, I find six behaviors and habits that set off the human anxiety smoke alarm more frequently than it should.

1. **Black-And-White Thinking** ~ also known as all-or-nothing thinking. We see it daily in the standoffs and gridlocks of our legislative process: looking at every situation as right or wrong with no consideration of gray areas. And being wrong (defined as "disagreeing with me") is the unforgiveable sin. Now turn that inward: it's a heavy burden being the only one who's right all the time. You can never admit, even to yourself, the possibility of being wrong; but there are those occasional mistakes and slipups, and doubts begin to creep in and you begin to condemn yourself as incompetent—everybody's going to think I'm incompetent. The reality is, you're human. Nobody thinks you're incompetent, if they even notice the mistakes. But the thoughts fester; anxiety begins to creep in every time you send an email.

[1] https://www.huffpost.com/entry/worst-habits-anxiety-symptoms_l_64ff5456e4b0087ca123935e

2. **Avoidance** ~ Colorado-based psychologist Jennifer Anders says it's the #1 anxiety-producing behavior. I think most people believe the opposite: dwelling on something intensifies stress. You can avoid that credit card balance for a time, but eventually you have to go back to it. It's still there, and Anxiety becomes worse when you avoid the situation, or the place, or the people that trigger your anxiety.
3. **Seeking Reassurance** ~ Constantly asking for other people's feedback on a situation or Googling your health symptoms contributes to your anxiety.
4. **Negative Self-Talk** ~ Telling yourself you're not good enough or something won't work out. That's just flat self-cruelty; plus, it's adding to your anxiety. I know personally about this one. I find myself using harsh, hurtful words my father used. Pay attention to the words you use with yourself.
5. **People-Pleasing** ~ Think about it: When you're constantly putting other people's needs and opinions above your own, you probably are neglecting yourself, which can cause anxiety. Like in most of life's situations, balance is the key.
6. **Catastrophizing** ~ This one may be the worst of all. I call it the "Chicken Little" syndrome: "The sky is falling!" Conjuring up in your mind the worst-case scenario and believing that's what going down; overestimating the situation and underestimating your ability to cope with it.

Six behaviors and habits that are the opposite of loving yourself; six behaviors and habits that make it more difficult to love your neighbor, because you're depriving yourself. The old Frank Sinatra song lyrics ask, "How can I be right for somebody else if I'm not right for me?"

So, what can be done? ***First***, breathe. When we do something that provokes anxiety, literally take a deep breath. Tell our brain, "Hey, we survived! The world didn't end!" Deep breathing or 'belly breathing' is, literally, one of the most calming actions we can take to lower the heart rate and slow the anxiety tailspin.

Second, claim your identity as a child of God. Ethel Waters, who helped break the color barrier in the music industry and later was a favorite soloist with Billy Graham, said, "I know I'm somebody 'cause God made me, and God don't make no junk".

Third, become aware of your five senses: taste, touch, sight, smell, sound—gifts that literally get us into the present moment, which is where we need to be in order to move toward self-love as children of God. We can't take our senses into the past or into the future when we take mental trips there. The only place we can experience our senses directly is right now. So focus: what are you seeing? Hearing? Sensing?

Finally... finally, take the deep breathing to a deeper level. You can do it at a non-religious level and call it biofeedback, or you can do it at a religious level and call it meditation or contemplation. The mechanics are virtually identical. We'll focus on

how-to meditate next week.

And throughout this series of sermons I'll review and expand these ideas; but it's important to note—and I hope to be demonstrating—that the social sciences and the healing sciences and the life and teachings of Jesus are not mutually exclusive, so I hope to be bringing them together and blending them into an approach that's both spiritual and practical.

This week, I'd like you to do three things. They're on your insert.

1. Read the whole 19th chapter of Leviticus. Jot down specific issues of social ethics and personal morality, and note how today's culture grades on those issues.
2. Review the fill-in-the blanks insert in your bulletin, and grade yourself on a scale of 1-10 on each. Where might you work to reduce stress and anxiety in your life?
3. Review the four ways to work toward reducing stress and opening yourself to a deeper self-love. Does one leap off the page and say, "Do me! Do me!"?

Next week I will begin by asking for voluntary responses. I won't call on anybody; I promise. I want you to come back! I'm looking forward to hearing your responses.

[Prayer Slide]

Prayer

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