Invitation to the Table

Jesus said two divine commandments define all the law and prophets—all divine revelation: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and with all your mind” and “Love your neighbor as yourself.” Christian teaching and preaching have been pretty strong on that “Love God” and “Love Neighbor” part; not so strong on that “as yourself” part. We’ve been looking at things that inhibit our ability to love our neighbor because they inhibit our ability to love ourselves.

One of the greatest inhibitors of all is the myth of the “self-made” person. 17th century poet, John Donne, wrote “No Man Is an Island” emphasizing the interconnectedness of humanity, suggesting that no one is truly self-sufficient; that each person's actions and destiny are intertwined with others.

Jesus put it this way: ***“I am the vine; you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.”***

At this Table, the Cup reminds us that we are connected with Jesus and through him we are connected interdependently with each other and are united in our common need of God’s grace.

Our Communion Hymn is #400, *“When You Do This, Remember Me.”*

Pastoral Prayer

Creating God, made visible in your Son Jesus, and leading us by your ever-present Spirit, your inspired witnesses have a lot to say about unity—about how we relate to one another. One says, “How good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity.” Another urges us to “Maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” We acknowledge that unity is very important to you and sometimes difficult for us.

Remind us—again—that in the deepest sense we are united, even when we are not aware of it. In your grace you have gifted this church with a spirit of mutual love and affection. In this place we acknowledge a deep level of objective unity. Protect us with your Spirit against any subjective element that would bring disunity. Strengthen us to be vigilant and faithful to the conviction that in you we are one.

Yet, we confess that too often we are distracted in our busy lives and take our unity for granted. With your servant, Isaiah we confess that we are people of unclean lips and we share humanity with people of unclean lips. In weaker moments, when we are distracted, it is we who interrupt your gift of unity. We can be petty and easily offended. We can be sinfully quick to offend others. We can be self-righteous and quick to judge others. We have a terrible ability to take minor matters of preference and turn them into major matters that threaten our unity.

Forgive our carelessness. Renew us by your Spirit and strengthen our eagerness to believe the best about each other; our commitment to serve each other; our resolve to listen before we speak.

Most of all, renew our awareness of the presence of Christ, who is the vine in which we abide, and without whom we can do nothing. We pray in his name. Amen.

EPHESIANS 4:1-16 (NRSVUE) ***I, therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, [2]with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, [3]making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace: [4]there is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, [5]one Lord, one faith, one baptism, [6]one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all. [7]But each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ's gift. …[11]He himself granted that some are apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers [12]to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, [13]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. [14]We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine by people's trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming; [15]but speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, [16]from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love.***
The Word of God for the people of God!

No Man Is an Island
By John Donne

No man is an island,
Entire of itself;
Every man is a piece of the continent,
A part of the main.

I Corinthians 12:12
By Paul, an Apostle of Jesus Christ

"For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ."

The National Institute of Health, WomensLaw.org, and several other sources list isolation as a form of psychological and emotional abuse. Domestic Violence advocacy group, DVConnnect.org says social isolation can be a form of domestic violence. I searched over a dozen websites, and found zero positive references to "isolation."

And yet, during America's post-WWII glory days of prosperity, a subtle movement began to embrace a form of isolation as the ideal. Two new demographic trends emerged to set the basis of the movement: middle class, and suburbia.

New technologies gave rise to new social habits. For generations the front porch had been a stable institution of socialization as neighbors out on twilight strolls stopped to visit (now we have "joggers;" they don't stop to visit, even if we're on the front porch). The front porch was a place to cool off on those warm summer nights.

But along came air conditioning—and television and we moved inside—to stay. Along came the patio and charcoal grill and BBQ pit. People in the burbs moved out into the back yard. And they built privacy fences…

Neighborhoods used to be venues of social interaction; now, the majority of

neighborhoods are enclaves of isolated households, and it many cases neighbors don't even know each other's names; but it's called "privacy."

The most striking aspect of both isolation and privacy is that they confront basic understandings of human nature; in fact, the instinct toward gathering in herds, schools, flocks, packs, swarms, colonies, gaggles, pods, and coveys is basic to all animal life. We humans are more likely to talk about tribes, families, clans, teams, gangs, clubs, or on a larger scale, communities, states, and nations. Marshall McLuhan even coined the term, "global village." Life is fullest in community.

We've been looking at what Jesus called the greatest commandment, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind," and the companion commandment he said is like it: "Love your neighbor as yourself." Loving God and neighbor gets all the attention while that "as yourself" phrase gets lost. And yet, the ability to love our neighbor is directly dependent on how we love ourselves.

We've been addressing factors that inhibit our ability to love ourselves and thus inhibit our ability to love our neighbor. Anxiety is a major factor. And as I said last week: there are medical bases of some anxiety; biochemical imbalance—an overactive or underactive thyroid; and as Bill Lacy taught me last week, when the pituitary in the brain tells adrenal glands to dump excessive cortisol, the results can include anxiety, depression, irritability... It's hard to love your neighbor under those conditions, and medical attention takes precedence over pastoral care.

But for the episodic anxiety we all experience occasionally, we've talked about deep breathing and sensory awareness and meditation as ways to find relief.

Isolation is another major inhibitor of self-confidence and self-love. Of course, we all need private time; information overload and invasive marketing and criminal hacking have made privacy a security issue. We need privacy; and solitude becomes an effective mental, emotional, and spiritual context for restoration and refreshment. But virtually everything in God's creation is part of one interdependent system.

The creation narratives in Genesis highlight the sequence, order, and purpose-fulness of God's creation, with each day's creation building upon the previous one, a process described and confirmed by science.

Different ecosystems, like forests, oceans, mountains, deserts, are intercon-nected through factors like climate, water cycles, and the movement of species (the Goldfinches were on the move this week. Did you see them?)

And human beings are part of this interdependent system. Our relationships with each other and with nature and with the social systems surrounding us play crucial roles in human well-being and the flourishing of society.

This concept of interdependence and interconnectedness is recognized and studied and analyzed in the physical and social sciences and in philosophical systems.

Chaos theory talks about the butterfly effect: a butterfly flaps its wings and sets off an atmospheric chain reaction that affects weather in other parts of the planet. It's a metaphor, but it illustrates the interconnectedness of creation. And as a Christian pastor and preacher I affirm this interdependence as a reflection of God's nature and character. And the historic witness of God's interaction with humanity—a witness that includes what we call The Bible—highlights the unity and harmony and interdependence within the whole created order.

So, if the challenge to self-love is isolation; the antidote—from natural science, from social science, and from creation, itself—is connection—interdependence—community. Privacy and solitude are desirable qualities necessary for deep spirituality; but without a balance with community, their counterparts are loneliness and isolation, both of which stifle spirituality and inhibit self-love and its extension, love of neighbor.

People who test high in self-image generally are active in some group—from civic clubs to sports teams to political action groups to musical ensembles; and those who test highest in self-image consistently name participation in religious communities as very important.

Now, let's be honest. The church today is broken; the Body of Christ is dismembered; its reputation tarnished, and its credibility fading. Media coverage blasts away at mega-church pastors with private jets and yachts; and sexual misconduct by clergy gets headlines and cable TV leads. But rare indeed is media coverage of small congregations that spend their resources to serve their communities and love their neighbors.

Perhaps worst of all is the reaction of some churches which goes something like this: since we're failing as a church, we'll promote government voucher scams to turn public schools into religious institutions; what we fail to accomplish through the ministries of our church we'll inflict through legislative action. The fact is, those groups are pushing people away from Christianity.

So, yes, the Body of Christ is dismembered; and many have simply given up. But if you look long enough, you can find situations and places where people are ***speaking the truth in love, striving to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love."***

The church was called into being to be the visible sign of God's once-for-all act of reconciliation with humanity; to be the visible expression of God's nature.

You don't find it everywhere; it's not in every cathedral or sanctuary; it rarely makes the front page; but it does exist. And wherever you find it, it remains the best hope as a foundation for loving our neighbor as ourself. May it be so among us.

Pray with me.