I Gotta' Be Me!

MARK 12:28-34 (NRSVUE) ***One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well he asked him, "Which commandment is the first of all?" [29]Jesus answered, "The first is, 'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; [30]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.' [31]The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these." [32]Then the scribe said to him, "You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that 'he is one, and besides him there is no other'; [33]and 'to love him with all the heart and with all the understanding and with all the strength' and 'to love one's neighbor as oneself'—this is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices." [34]When Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." After that no one dared to ask him any question.***
The Word of God for the people of God

The 1968 Broadway musical, "Golden Rainbow", didn't make much gold; but, one of its songs made a mint for Sammy Davis, Jr. The song was "I Gotta' Be Me." The Lyrics include: "I can't be right for somebody else if I'm not right for me."

It's worth noting that Davis was a man of color—one who knew what it is to be put down because of who you are—to be treated as unworthy because of his chromosomes.

My generation has seen the civil rights movement, the women's movement, the sexual revolution, the Pride movement; and the War on Poverty. Every human generation has seen the devastation of poverty. Jesus said, "The poor will always be with you." There always are those with power who limit access to a fair and equitable standard of living, who build empires on the sweat of cheap labor and bribed officials.

Some people—especially children—are bullied because they're small and unathletic, or because they're artistic or overweight.

People are tired of being put down and kept in subjection because of their genetic identity and the social manipulations of some of the rich and powerful. But the established, old school white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant, Male, heterosexual, dominant culture is being dragged, kicking and screaming, into a culture of equity and inclusiveness; and slow progress is being made.

Women are flexing their muscles and driving corporate and political policy; though they still are paid less than men in the same position doing the same work.

People of color are broadening our academic and political awareness; although they still have to sit at the back of the bus called social justice.

LGBTQ+ people are beginning to be recognized in their fight against the same kind of biblical distortions that justified slavery and racism and, in some cases, still would keep women of the pulpit.

It's a wonderful thing to see people reaching beyond the self-loathing that

so often accompanies the stereotypes into which they've been pushed; when they begin acknowledging and expressing their self-worth; stretching to exercise their value to the community and to make a positive difference.

PSALM 139:13-14 (NRSVUE)
For it was you who formed my inward parts;
you knit me together in my mother's womb.
I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.
Wonderful are your works; that I know very well.

Ethel Waters, the wonderful gospel singer who accompanied so many of Billy Graham's crusades, said, "*I know I'm* somebody, because God don't make no junk!" *[Shoulda' been the title of the sermon!]*

The strategies people use to break out of oppression are as varied as they are. Some ways are effective, some are ineffective, some are counterproductive.

In his book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Brazilian educator and Liberation Theologian, Paulo Freire, pointed out that when an oppressed people overthrow their oppressors, the most frequent follow-up is a blood bath—mass executions of those who had been their tormentors. Given the human default toward vengeance, that's understandable. But it also is counterproductive because the default cycle of violence and revenge never ends. What goes around comes around.

But people long to be free to just be themselves, assuming, of course, they really know who they are. In Mark's Gospel reading, Jesus offers a balanced approach to self-affirmation, an approach that predates today's self-help advice by two millennia; in fact, the principles Jesus used already were ancient in his day.

All three Synoptic Gospels record the question of the Greatest Commandment. In Matthew and Mark, it is Jesus who is asked the question, and his response begins with the Jewish confession of faith, **the Shema**: "Hear, Oh Israel, the LORD our God, the LORD is one." In the trajectory of human comprehension of God, Israel is one of the oldest monotheistic religions—the belief in only one God.

The commands are rooted in the character and nature of a God who refuses to be numbered among a pantheon of deities but rather is known in his history with a particular people; not as a ruthless tyrant or a genial Santa Clause, but as revealed in the life of Israel—the people God has redeemed time and time again.[1]

THEREFORE, ***Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.*** All of that's found, ***not*** in the Ten Commandments, but in Deuteronomy 6:5, and some variation of it is found six other times in Deuteronomy. Deuteronomy possibly was written as part of Josiah's reform in the late 7th century BCE, one of only two eras following the death of

[1] Adapted from Charles Cousar in *Texts for Preaching: A Lectionary Commentary Based on the NRSV—Year* B (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993) p. 574.

Solomon when Israel walked in the ways of the Lord. The other time was 70 years later when Hezekiah initiated a similar reform. In Matthew and Mark, Jesus said this is the first commandment, and the most important. But, another is like it:

Love your neighbor… Again, this is not in the Ten Commandments. It's found in Leviticus, probably written almost 200 years after Josiah's reform—written in part under the direction of Ezra as training of the priesthood when the temple was rebuilt following Babylonian captivity, roughly 530 years before the birth of Jesus.

In Matthew and Mark, Jesus says these two commandments sum up the entirety of Jewish law and prophetic writings.

But wait! There's more: all three Synoptics finish the Leviticus passage: "love your neighbor as **yourself**. I'm surprised, and a bit perplexed, that none of the commentaries I read addressed this final phrase, which seems, to me, to qualify and describe the way one is commanded to love one's neighbor. "As yourself?"

Perhaps we could reverse the order. The rules of grammar allow that: "Love yourself as you love your neighbor." It often is true that we feel best about ourselves when we are being kind to someone else.

There is an important distinction between Christ-like self-love and narcissism, and influential self-help books and motivational speakers can be so singularly focused on self-love that they unintentionally promote narcissism. These commandments present not only a balance between love of God, love of neighbor, and love of self, they also link the three so tightly that they are mutually interdependent. That beautiful first epistle of John puts it this way: ***"…those who do not love a brother or sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen"*** **(4:20).**

That line in "I Gotta' Be Me!" seems to get it: "How can I be right for somebody else if I'm not right for me?" It's true: self-care is crucial; a caregiver can't be of value if he or she is worn out and exhausted from the giving of care. The rate of burnout is higher among caregiving vocations than any other occupation.

In these three Gospel accounts, I find two factors that create the healthiest love of self: (1) recognition of and gratitude to God as the source of who we are, and in that gratitude (2) working to develop our God-given potential—becoming the best we can be, so we can love our neighbor as ourselves.

In Luke, the story is a bit different. It begins with a lawyer testing Jesus with the question, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus responded, "You know the law. What does it say?" And it is the lawyer who says, "Love the Lord with all your heart, etc., and love your neighbor as yourself." Jesus says, "Good job. Do that and you'll live."

But the lawyer is sarcastic and keeps on testing. His response is, "And who is my neighbor?" to which Jesus answered, ***A man was going down from Jerusalem to***

Jericho and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and took off, leaving him half dead. The parable of the Good Samaritan. I suggest the hated Samaritan—the one who turns out to be the neighbor of the man who had been beaten and robbed—I suggest the Samaritan exhibited a healthy love of self. And Jesus closed his parable with this: "Go and do likewise."

Pastoral Prayer

Loving Creator, thank you for creating us in your image—placing a part of yourself in each of us. Help us to acknowledge ourselves as valued parts of your masterpiece. Help us to begin where we are—just the way we are, without self-judgment—to accept ourselves with all our emotions, our hopes and dreams, our personality and vulnerabilities, our unique way of being.

Remind us that you love us just the way we are; but you love us too much to leave us just the way we are. Show each of us the dream you have for our lives and touch us with your sense of purpose so we can live into that dream.

Free us to accept your unconditional love and teach us the empowering experience of loving ourselves as you love us so we become strong enough to break all the lies we're programmed to believe—the lies that tell us we are not good enough, or strong enough, or smart enough; that we can't make it. Grant us to know the truth that, whatever you have created us to be and do, we can do it all through Christ, who strengthens us.

Guide our personal journeys toward the measure of Christ, whom you set before us as the model of who we can be. Help us to accept his example as our only standard of life. And when we fail to live up to that standard, make us aware of your forgiveness and strengthen our will to forgive ourselves, so we can let go of emotional poison and self-judgment and refocus on Jesus—fresh, as if for the first time.

Freed by your forgiveness, help us to forgive. Empowered by the awareness of your unconditional love, help us to love unconditionally—to accept our loved ones and acquaintances without wanting to change them.

Help us to become masters of gratitude, generosity, and love and to enjoy all your creation with you. Amen.

Invitation to the Table

This Thursday will be the 54th anniversary of the Apollo 11 moon landing. Three American astronauts went to the moon: Michael Collins, Buzz Aldrin, and Neil Armstrong.

Some folks refused to believe a man had walked on the moon. I was serving my student church, and one of the elders said it was filmed "somewhere in Arizona."

Along with millions of Americans, Jo Lynn and Craig and I watched it on CBS television. Walter Cronkite covered the event. Cronkite was considered "the most trusted man in America." When we all heard the words, "The eagle has landed," this man who was accustomed to speaking to the world was speechless. All he could say was, "Whew!"

A few hours later came Neil Armstrong's unforgettable words, "That's one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind."

There was another "giant leap" for mankind when "The Word became flesh." In Philippians 2 Paul writes of Christ:

Although he existed in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be grasped,
7 but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
assuming human likeness.

Back on earth, Neil Armstrong said he considered himself an ordinary man who was privileged to do some extraordinary things. In Christ, the extraordinary became ordinary. He identified with humans like you and me

At this table we remember "giant leaps." We admire extraordinary human accomplishments, and we celebrate with gratitude God's extraordinary gift of grace demonstrated through the ordinary life of one man.