

*“Taking Care of Our Most Important Relationships”**Pastor Lauren Wright**My Relationship with Myself**January 27, 2019*

Key Text: Matthew 22: 34-40

I remember learning lots of times in Sunday school and Vacation Bible school and children’s ministry about the greatest commandment. I remember lots and lots of conversations about the whole message of the gospel, the whole message of what Jesus came to teach us being summed up in just a few verses: Love God, Love People. And while that’s not wrong, and I’m glad that was a part of my upbringing, it wasn’t until college that I began to think and hear and understand a crucial part of that greatest commandment: love yourself.

We’re in the midst of our first sermon series of 2019. And honestly, it’s more than just a sermon series: we’re focusing our ministry on family and important relationships. We’ve had a prayer team gathering that focused on praying for our church family. Shortly, we’re having a comedy date night and chili cook off and launching some new small group opportunities to support families. And of course, we’re focusing on family and other important relationships in worship. The first week in January, Pastor Randy introduced the topic, and talked about problems we have in our important relationships. Last week, David Bean preached, and talked about our role in our important relationships. Today, we’re going to get a little more specific, and talk about one important relationship: your relationship with yourself.

Maybe you hear me say that, and you wonder why this matters. What is so important about our relationship with ourselves, anyway? Well, friends, the way that we view ourselves is the key to understanding the whole scripture, the whole greatest commandment. Our scripture lesson this morning is a relatively short one, so I’m going to read it one more time, just in case you missed it. But before I do so, here’s a little context for our scripture this morning.

This comes from the end of the gospel of Matthew, while Jesus is in the prime of his teaching. And as you heard, the Pharisees and Sadducees are trying to trap Jesus. They’re trying to catch him in his own words, so they can prove him wrong. They’re all so caught up in the legalism and following the rules, that they want to catch Jesus making a mistake here in his explanations.

³⁴ Hearing that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, the Pharisees got together.³⁵ One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question: ³⁶“Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?” ³⁷ Jesus replied: ““Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’^[a] ³⁸ This is the first and greatest commandment. ³⁹ And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’^[b] ⁴⁰ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”

Did you hear that? How are we to love the Lord and our neighbor? As we love ourselves. This means that God cares about our relationship with ourselves. God cares about the way that we think about ourselves, the words we use to describe ourselves, and the attitudes we have about ourselves.

And why is this? Why does God care? What does it matter what you think about yourself? It matters because the way we are made reflects God. The creation story in Genesis says that each person is made in the image of God. Let this sink in: each and every person who is made is made in the image of God. We are all individually image bearers of Christ. We often talk about this when we use language of viewing others as Children of God, as people of worth. But that also applies to ourselves.

If we are to look at ourselves with disdain, with despair, to not like who we are on a fundamental level, to not see any inherent goodness, then we are to say that God is not good. And that’s dangerous! I think there’s an example that we often use when talking about self-care that makes sense here – have you heard before that you cannot fill out of an empty pitcher? I know I have! This means that we cannot pour out, we cannot truly love and invest in others, when we ourselves are empty. This means that our relationship with ourselves effects our relationship with God and with others.

Recently, my friend Josh shared a TED Talk with me that really makes this point well. If you get our weekly ecommunications, I included a link for this talk in it, so maybe some of you have seen it. The TED talk is by a woman named Tracy McMillan, and it's called "The Person You Really Need To Marry." Her talk is about living into the vows of marriage with regard to yourself. It's about seeing yourself as good creation, as a person of sacred worth, RIGHT NOW. Not in ten years, or when you get that promotion, or when you lose ten pounds, or get a spouse, or have that baby, or any of the other conditions that we often put on our own self-love. It's recognizing that we are worthy of love right now, not just in the future.

This idea isn't just from the TED talk. We see this in the scriptures. We see this in our liturgy. Christ came to walk with us, to die for us, while we were sinners. God desires relationship with us RIGHT NOW, not just in the future. In fact, when we use the full communion liturgy, we'll often say "Christ died for us while we were yet sinners, this proves God's love for us" – God sees us as worthy.

Now, I want to take a minute here and make sure I'm clear here in saying this: I'm not trying to say that there's an easy fix, that if you get yourself in a good place with yourself, that if you love yourself well, then all of the sudden all of the other relationships in your life will fall into place. Maybe some of you have been told this before – that if you just get things right with you, then suddenly you won't be single anymore, or suddenly your marriage will be problem-free, or suddenly your kids won't fight anymore. And that's just not true! That's not how this works! But, in order to be in right relationship with God and neighbor, we must be in right relationship with ourselves. Because truly loving yourself is loving the God who created you, is loving God who is reflected in you.

And how do we know this? We know this because we are made whole in Christ. You, as an individual person, are made whole in Christ. That's all – period. You are not made whole in your identity as spouse or parent or job or any other aspect of your personhood. **You are a whole person in Christ.** We live in a world where so many other identities vie for our attention. And often times, these are good things. Other relationships and families and careers and more are good things – but they are not good when that's what we view as making us whole people, as what we view as making us worthy. Our wholeness, our worthiness comes in Christ alone.

Loving ourselves can get twisted, though. We live in a world that is often motivated by self-righteousness and self-gratification. There's a popular TV show that made the phrase "treat yourself" so common. And if we're not careful, we can get caught on the other end of the extreme and view ourselves so highly that we ignore the image of God that we are made in! That's a dangerous place to be.

So friends, hear me say today that part of being in right relationship with yourself is then being in right relationship with God and neighbor. Loving yourself means then loving who God has made you to be – and God did not make us to be selfish, self-seeking, or isolated. Loving ourselves isn't an excuse to do whatever we want, or a reason to exist on our own. The greatest commandment isn't *just* to love yourself.

But, if we are truly loving ourselves, then, we are loving others. To truly love yourself is not to be self-seeking, and to give in to all of your wants. To truly love yourself is to connect with who God made you to be. And, friends, God made us to be in right relationship with one another. In fact, Christ commands us to love our neighbor. Period. For some of us, this comes easily. Maybe you have an awesome neighbor! Maybe you have neighbors that are easy to love, that love you right back. But maybe you have neighbors that are a little crazy. I'm sure we all have a story we could share right now of someone in our lives, someone who is our neighbor that is hard to love!

But rather than talking about neighbors, and which of our neighbors we are called to love, I want to think about what it means to love one another as Christ loves here in the church. Some of us come to worship with our extended families. Others of us come alone. But here, community exists. Maybe some of you have found this close community, this church family, in a small group, Sunday school class, Bible Study, or special interest group here in the church. There are ways that we as the church do really well at loving each other!

And do you know why we do this? We do this because we believe in covenant community. Today, at the 9:29 service, we have people who are officially joining the church, who are officially joining the church family. And when they do that, there are promises that they make. But there are also promises that the rest of the church makes, too.

The person joining is asked if they will support the church with their prayers, presence, gifts, service, and witness. They're asked if they're willing to be "all in". And then the church is asked to do the same thing – they're asked if they're ready to commit to adding these people to their family, who they will care for and support, and hold accountable.

So that's our challenge, church family – as people who are striving to know and love ourselves, we are driven to know and love others. How can we do this? How can we as a church love one another, as Christ has called and created us to do just this? When I was in college, there was one family in the church that made it their mission that no one ate lunch alone on Sunday afternoons. For this family, that was their way of loving their neighbors. They'd always offer an open invitation to join them for a meal. And why did they do this – well, they did this because they wanted others to know that they mattered. For this family, sharing a meal together meant seeing people as valuable and important. Sharing a meal was a small gesture that they did, to love others well, and to help other people begin to see themselves as God's good creation.

Now, we aren't all called by God to love our neighbors in the same way. What this one family did is just one example. In fact, here at our church, I've seen many ways that you all love one another well! We have members of our church who visit people who are in the hospital or who are shut in. We have trained Stephen Ministers who come along side people in their times of need. We have people who are praying faithfully for all. We have people pouring their time and energy into youth and children's ministry, showing our children and students that they matter. We have people who have committed to Manna Ministry and the Warming Shelter, providing meals and shelter for members of the Culpeper community who are often forgotten. I could go on and on! There are so many ways that we love our neighbor here.

But you see, these things are all so interconnected. When we love ourselves, we are in fact loving God. And when we are loving God, we naturally want to love others. And when we're loving others, we show them the importance of loving themselves. So friends, today, I invite you to think about where you are on this pathway, to consider where you need to grow. Are you loving yourself? Are you loving who God has created you to be? Are you loving your neighbor?

Will you pray with me?