

Peter Wiley
 Matthew 22:34-40
 March 9, 2008
 Hudson
 Lent V

INTRO: What's the number one thing God wants from us? To love God . . . with all our heart, soul and mind. That comes straight from Deuteronomy (6.5). The Pharisees would have known exactly what Jesus was talking about. That text, that rule, that law was central to Jewish life and liturgy. Love God. But how do you love God? Jesus follows up with what the Bible calls a second command. It's a command . . . but I think it's really more of a "how to." How do you love God? By loving your neighbor. And then . . . how do you love your neighbor? Like you love yourself. And that . . . that's the key to it all. If you don't love yourself, how can you ever hope to love somebody else? And if you can't love somebody else . . . good luck loving God.

SCRIPTURE: *When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" 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.' This is the greatest commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."*

SERMON: One of the most heavily attended funerals I have ever led was for Bob Bierbower. People crammed in every corner of the church the night of his service. Bob was forty-nine when he died. He was a sheet-rocker by trade. But what really defined Bob was that he was a recovering alcoholic. By the time he died he'd been sober for more than a dozen years.

All those people at his service weren't there because of his work – sheet-rocking doesn't create a lot of personal bonds. And they weren't there because they were close friends and family . . . he'd burned so many of those in his days of bingeing. They were there (I think), because Bob had loved them all purely and simply just as they were and without any sort of pretense. He was one of those rare individuals who just loved people for who they were in any particular moment more than almost anybody I've ever known. One time when I was visiting Bob when he was under hospice care, I asked him how he could do that, and Bob retold me some of his story that I already knew . . . and then a little more.

He told me that he was an addict, both because he was simply addicted and because he felt so horrible. He didn't like his life and he didn't like himself either. He'd never felt much self-worth. And then, the further he plunged into drinking, and the more his life fell apart, the less he could see in himself anything worth loving. It was a horrible downward spiral. Two marriages ruined. Friends and jobs lost. He hit bottom. There was no way out.

It was then that he met someone who told him God loves him . . . and he was actually enough of a mess to believe it. He actually believed that God loved him despite the disaster he'd made of his life. And it's something he never forgot from that moment on.

And it was that simple sense that God loved him that made Bob able to love himself . . . even though he wasn't very lovable at the time. And it made him know that there was nothing – absolutely nothing he could do (because he'd already done it all) – that could make him not worthy of love. That's what changed it all for him. He had nothing left to prove. And when he didn't have to prove anything, he could be a loving presence to everyone he came across.

Over the last four weeks we've talked a lot about what we can take on for Lent. About faithful, generous, caring acts. But none of them – NONE – can happen without love. And no love can happen unless we actually love ourselves.

The late William Sloan Coffin used to say it well. He wrote: "If we hate ourselves, we can never love others, for love is the gift of oneself. How will you make a gift of that which you hate?" (William Sloan Coffin, Credo, p. 21)

Loving self? That sounds so egocentric – so "me first." Be careful – I want to be clear here about what I'm NOT talking about: This isn't about self-indulgence or "me time." It's not about some sort of narcissistic looking out for myself or nobody else will. It's about believing in ourselves. It's about knowing that we are loved children of God with value beyond measure.

That's one of the central things we say in baptism. When we baptized little Bobby a few minutes ago we were making a clear confession that we believe that he and we are deeply loved by God. Loved, not because of anything we've done or haven't done. But loved simply because we (and he, Bobby) are absolute gifts from God. How can you not love a gift like that? It's cliché, but it's true. God doesn't make junk.

Love starts with the acknowledgement of the inherent gift of each one of us.

- That doesn't mean we don't do dumb things.
- That doesn't mean we don't do things for which we really do need to seek forgiveness from each other.
- That doesn't mean that there aren't things we need to better about ourselves. We all – every one of us – have much which we could improve.

And yet. And yet, just as we are, we are inherently valuable loved beings – even if we're not always all that lovable.

Sounds nice to say we ought to love ourselves, doesn't it? But it's not always that easy. If you don't like yourself much, it's not so easy to change. It's not like having a friend or a co-worker who gets on your nerves. In those cases you can limit the amount of time spent with the person – only be with them in small doses. That's hard to do with yourself – you're always with you.

It's not the only reason (and may not even be the primary cause), but one significant cause for self-destructive behavior is a lack of self-love. I see it all the time:

- > People with drug and alcohol addictions . . . hiding from a lack of a sense of self-worth.
- > It's true with gambling and sexual addictions. It's true with people who find themselves shopping to escape their lack of self-esteem or with people who become obsessed with our ever changing looks and physiques.
- > I see it with people who put up with abusive relationships, unfair bosses, and friends that treat them like dirt – all because they don't feel that they deserve any better.

And when you become so consumed with your own issues and lacking and emptiness, you're not going to be much good to anyone else. When you can't love yourself, you sure can't do a very good job loving anybody else.

So how do we gain that sense of self-love? It all starts in knowing that we're loved . . . just like we are . . . just like we say in baptism.

A 2006 report by the Pew Research Center found that 43 percent of people who attend church at least once a week reported being "very happy" while only 26 percent of those who attend seldom or never said the same. Why would that be? Could it be, at least in part, because they get that regular reminder that God loves them, that they're loved and lovable?

That's what we say in baptism. We take a baby before he or she has done anything worthy of love or of anger. And we confess that God loves the child already and unconditionally.

In just a few minutes we are going to pass out a piece put together by Karen Verner (our parish nurse) to help us reflect on how we might better care for our mind, body and spirit – how we might take more seriously appropriate self-love. Read through it. Reflect on it. Fill in the piece that invites us to make a personal plan for good spiritual care of our minds, bodies and spirits. Because if we don't do it, nobody else will. And if we don't give that basic care to ourselves, we won't be much good for others or for God. We can point others in the right direction for self-care – but we'd better do it for ourselves as well. That's our hope this week in Lent as we live our way into Easter: that we take seriously how deeply we are loved by God. And that we need to care for that gift we've been given in our own lives. Take seriously the need to love yourself . . . and we will be much better at loving each other and God.