

THE TWO MOST IMPORTANT THINGS IN LIFE

Part 2

Matthew 22:34-40; Luke 25:25-37 CEV

A woman pays a visit to her psychiatrist. She's attractive, well paid in her profession, and generally well liked by friends and colleagues. She says, "Here's the thing, Doctor. I think everyone in the world is staring at me. And I think the only reason they're staring is because I'm just a big fat slob, with fat on my ..." The psychiatrist stops her and says, "I'm going to interrupt you right there. I can tell you right now, quite objectively, that none of that is true. To be blunt, you're smart and attractive and a very likable person. If anything, I was going to comment that you seem a bit thin and tired: maybe even a bit frail and underweight. You know, sometimes we have a lot of ill-informed feelings about ourselves, and here, right now, the goal is to get to the root of those feelings, so we can see why it is we're doing what we're doing, and why we're feeling as we're feeling."

He's evidently struck a chord, because the woman instantly breaks down in gentle sobs, repeatedly nodding in agreement. She wipes her eyes, blows her nose, looks at him, and says, "You're right, you're right ... I have needed a nose job all my life, and I never did look good in jeans. I think that's why I pack on the lard like this."ⁱ She hadn't heard a word! Her self image, and here I would have to say her "self-loathing", was so strong she couldn't see the mirror that her psychiatrist was holding up for her.

We can go the other way, of course. We may think of ourselves more highly than we should. Our self image may be blown way out of proportion as we hear a roar instead of a "mew." (illustration; a fluffy kitten looking into the mirror and seeing a ferocious lion.) We humans are such a complicated bunch. I wonder how many of us here this morning really do have an accurate self evaluation of ourselves.

I wonder how many of us *really* see ourselves as others see us. According to our Scripture reading this morning, when Jesus was outlining the two most important things in life, correct self love is critical to all our relationships, especially to fulfilling His "second most important commandment" – "love others *as much* as you love yourself." Did you get that? "as much as" – "to the same extent as" – "the same way as" Not more, but, also not less.

Whether our self-image, self love, is off the scale either way, it all boils down to an undue emphasis on self. Somewhere between loving ourselves too much, and

loathing ourselves, is the balance that needs to exist in order to love others. If we're going to go by the "as much as" paradigm, if we love ourselves too little we love others too little. If we love ourselves too much, we *also* love others too little, because we fill our world and there is no room for anyone but ourselves. Either way, it becomes about us, and no one else is in the equation!

Last week we talked about the first, and as Jesus said, the most important commandment, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and mind". We tried to get our heads and hearts around what loving God looked like. God is Spirit, and so obviously the love must be on a spiritual plane. In the same way we spend time with our earthly lovers, which is one of the most important ways we show that we love them, we spend time with our Spiritual Lover.

We said as we were thinking about a "date with God" that it is an intentional time when you get together with your Lover, "your spiritual Lover", to share time. Sometimes it is time in silence, just listening for the voice of your Beloved. Sometimes it is reading the Bible. Sometimes it is sharing your deepest concerns at an intense heart-wrenching level. It is what Lovers do. They listen, they talk, they share, and in so doing touch each others' hearts.

I believe that there is a very good reason for the first; and most important commandment to be the first and most important commandment: "Listen ... The Lord your God is one; so love the Lord God with all your passion and prayer and intelligence and energy." Mark 12: 29,30 Msg It is because the second most important commandment is based on the first, and cannot become a reality *without* the first. The beginning of a correct self image, a realistic understanding of who we are is based on the knowledge of how God sees us. And, we cannot see ourselves as others see us until we're in a relationship with God who sees us as we are....and loves us unconditionally.

God knows us intimately because God made us, and as the kid said: "God don't make no junk!" If that's how God feels about us, who are we to either think more, or less, of ourselves? And if we know that we are loved, how can we not love as we are loved!

John wrote in his first letter:

"We love because God loved us first. But if we say we love God and don't love each other, we are liars. We cannot see God. So how can we love God if we don't love the people we can see? The commandment that God has given us is: "Love God and love each other." 1 John 4:19-21 CEV

That, by the way, is the basis of our new tag line here at Wall Street. You've seen it on our bulletin, website and all communications from our Board Chair: "God loves ALL. So do we".

We are told that this is a requirement. A commandment; when we read "Love thy neighbour as thyself", our first question is "who is our neighbour? Are we being told to

love the neighbour whose in-ground pool we swim in, or the neighbour that brings over fresh biscuits straight out of the oven, or the one who shovels our driveway when we're sick?

I heard on the CBC news today about an 80 year old Japanese woman who was being moved from one shelter to another arena by volunteers. She didn't know them, and as confusing as it all was she said: "They are so kind. Just like my neighbours!"

"Who *is* my neighbour?" was the question that an expert in the law of Moses asked Jesus right after being told this second most important commandment.

Jesus answered by telling a story about three men who were traveling from Jerusalem to Jericho, along a rather dangerous road because it had a reputation for thieves lying in wait to mug and steal. Each traveller came across a man who had been beaten and robbed and left lying in the ditch, "half dead" the Bible says.

In Kenya there's a stretch of road like that between Nairobi and Embu. It is especially dangerous after dark because thieves will put a strip of wood or metal across the road that features nails with the business end sticking up. When a vehicle comes along, and runs across this device, it will get one or more flat tires. Once the vehicle is stopped, the thieves rush from their hiding places in the bushes and rob the stranded motorists leaving them dead or injured, as they take off with their haul.

Many of you will know the story of the "Good Samaritan". Of the three men who saw the man in the ditch, two of whom were "religious" and expected to be compassionate, only the man from Samaria was moved by the plight of the victim, and did something to help the injured man.

To get the picture clear, the teacher of the law must have been astounded when Jesus said that first the priest passed over to the other side of the road to avoid the injured man, and then equally surprised when the temple helper also pretended not to see him. These upstanding Jews, respected leaders in the religious community should have been the ones to respond to this urgent human need. But when the Samaritan saw the man, and bent over and started to minister to his wounds, the teacher of the law must have just about choked! The Jews and Samaritans disdained each other due to centuries of conflict and rivalry. And, according to Jesus, this is the example of being a "neighbour", the tangible picture of "loving others".

Then Jesus asked, "Which one of these three people was a real neighbour to the man who was beaten up by robbers?" (Luke 10:36 CEV)

Jesus wanted to know if this brilliant Jewish scholar had gotten the message. And, it appears he had.

The teacher answered, "The one who showed pity.

Jesus said, Go and do the same." (Luke 10:37 CEV)

Ever since Jesus told that story, being a "Good Samaritan" has always had the connotation of good and helpful deeds, of compassionate responses. Really, ... the loving of others as much as we love ourselves principle. And it all becomes a big circle,

because as God loves, we love ourselves, and respond to God's love by loving both God and others. Simple? Absolutely! Profound? Yes! With far-reaching implications!

I have a friend who keeps saying "I just want to be happy." And that is a very natural, fully human wish. We all want to be "happy" even though full happiness forever on this plane seems to be elusive. St. Augustine in his book, *City of God*, calls this happiness "bliss". He said:

In order that we may know how to love ourselves, an end has been established for us to which we are to refer all our action, so that we may attain to bliss, (happiness). For if we love ourselves; our one wish is to achieve blessedness, (happiness). Now this end is to cling to God. Thus, if we know how to love ourselves, the commandant to love our neighbour bids us to do all we can to bring our neighbour to love God. This is the worship of God; this is true religion; this is the right kind of devotion; this is the service which is owed to God aloneⁱⁱ. As I said earlier, this love forms a full circle.

At age 17 Jennie Todd found fault with everything about the church from the teaching methods to the time worship was held. She resented her parents forcing her to go to church and Sunday School every week. She would sit in her class with her arms folded across her chest, slumped in a folding chair in the back of the class. She refused to make friends or to participate in class discussions. It was clear to everyone Jennie did not want to be there.

One night, though, Jennie came home to find her parents huddled in the driveway in their bathrobes. Their house was engulfed in flames. They watched as all their worldly possessions were consumed in a frightening blaze as the fire department desperately worked in vain. It was a tragedy she would never forget. Then shortly after the fire, something happened that took Jennie by surprise. Some of the girls from her Sunday School class came to visit her at the motel where they were staying. One of the girls handed her an envelope. Jennie opened the envelope with trembling hands to discover it was filled with money. "It's from everyone in the class," one of the girls told her. "We took a collection."

Jennie was overwhelmed by the love and affection she was shown that day. She never really wanted to be part of the class, but the class showed her how much they cared for her. "I received a lot more than money that day," she reflected, "I received unconditional love and a fresh realization of what it means to belong to the church."

The mark of a Christian is the love we show for othersⁱⁱⁱ. The popular hymn says it best, "They'll know we are Christians by our love." Jesus Himself said: "By this everyone will know you are my followers, if you love one another". (John 13:35)

Paul said the same thing to the church at Galatia:

“All that the Law says can be summed up in the command to love others as much as you love yourself.” (Galatians 5:14 CEV)

And interestingly, James, Bishop of Jerusalem, half brother to Jesus went one step further by making the second commandment first in importance when he said:

“You will do all right if you obey the most important law in the Scriptures. It is the law that commands us to love others as much as we love ourselves.” (James 2:8 CEV)

Are we getting the message yet? What does loving others, or our neighbours look like? I guess you’ll have to show me! I guess I’ll have to show you. Enough talking. Let’s go for it - “Show and Tell!” Amen.

ⁱ Dan Kennedy: Jokes for People with Body Image Problems

ⁱⁱ City of God, Augustine: Christian Globe Networks

ⁱⁱⁱ Christian Globe Networks