

Sunday, September 29, 2019

The Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost

OLD SOUTH CHURCH IN BOSTON

the “I” pronoun, a sermon by Nancy S. Taylor, senior minister (this is the third in a series on 1. Love of Neighbor, 2. Love of Family, and 3. Love of Self)

Repeat after me: *I am fearfullyⁱ and wonderfully made.* Repeat after me: *I am fearfully and wonderfully made.* Repeat after me: *I am fearfully and wonderfully made.*

How does it make you feel to say that aloud?

To say: *I am fearfully and wonderfully made* is no complement to you. You didn't make you. You don't get the credit. It's a compliment to God! Give God the glory.

For the past two Sundays we have explored two biblical commandments to love. First, we explored Love of Neighbor. Second, last Sunday, we explored Love of Family. Today, the spotlight shines on you. Today, we address Love of Self.

Hear me church. Hear me when I say that it is okay to love yourself. More than okay. In fact, it is a biblical commandment. God asks it of you.

Let's review. Jesus said: Love God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first commandment and the greatest commandment. But near to it, a close second, intertwined with the first is this: love your neighbor *as you love yourself*.

Today we invite you to ponder, learn, and to practice this sacred undertaking. After all, in the words of the psalmist, you are indeed, in fact, undeniably, certifiably fearfully and wonderfully made. (Ps 139.14) We have it on biblical authority.

So what does this love of self look like? What does it feel like?

Maybe it looks like Jesus and his disciples caring for themselves, loving themselves by retreating from the world with all its ills and demands. Jesus and his followers practiced a rhythm of engagement and retreat. They regularly retreated for a while from the sick needing healing, from the sinner needing forgiveness, from the lame needing mending, from the blind needing sight, from the hungry needing filling. Maybe loving yourself looks like that: like retreat; like, dare I say, turning your back on the world – not for good, not forever – but long enough to refuel, refresh, and rest up for your next foray into human need. Jesus did it. Why wouldn't you?

Maybe it looks like putting your feet up and listening to your favorite music. Maybe it feels like dancing. Maybe it looks like reading, or traveling, or painting. Maybe it smells like inhaling the scent of lavender.

Maybe self-love is treating your taste-buds with turns at salty, sour, bitter, sweet and savory. Maybe it is putting your God-given taste-buds through their paces, delighting in the gift of

taste, of palate and tang and flavor. Maybe loving yourself tastes like ice cream on your tongue.

After all, Jesus was at the center of so many feasts his followers were labeled gluttons and drunkards. To be clear, they were neither gluttons nor drunkards. But neither did they live lives of abstinence and self-denial. On the contrary, Jesus invited them to savor life. And, he showed them how.

Maybe Jesus learned this self-love from the Book of Nehemiah: “Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks, and send some to those who have nothing prepared.” (Neh 8.10)

Maybe he learned it from the book of Ecclesiastes: “O, eat your food with gladness, and drink your wine with a joyful heart, for God has already approved what you do.” (Ecc 9.7)
Really? The Bible says that? Who knew?

Maybe self-love looks like the shepherds behind me in the tall lancet windows. Maybe it looks like that; like being lost in wonder, in reverence, their sheep forgotten for a moment, the cares of the world forgotten for a moment as the purposes of heaven are revealed to them. Maybe self-love looks like reverence, awe, an indulgence in mystery and miracle, a reveling in splendor and grandeur.

Maybe self-love looks like this: “Clap your hands; shout to God with cries of joy.” (Ps. 47.1)

Now, let’s be honest. I suspect that some of us annoy God endlessly. Others of us break God’s heart on a daily basis. We are the prodigal son. We are the rich young man. We are the workers early to work in the vineyard who begrudge anyone getting paid as much as we. We are the lost sheep, the ones who have erred and strayed from God’s ways.

But I have new for you: God loves you anyway. So, it’s okay to love yourself.

Some of us, maybe most of us, don’t manage to love our enemies. Some of us, maybe most of us, find it impossible to forgive those who hurt us. Some of us nurse grudges and fail to turn the other cheek.

God loves you nevertheless! So, it’s okay to love yourself.

Now, I know you know this, but I have to say it anyway. Your value, your worth, these do not come from what you achieve. Or from what you possess. Or from what others think of you. Your value, your worth come from the highest source of all: from the God who made you, who names and claims you, who made you in God’s own image and likeness; who knows you better than you know yourself and who loves you nevertheless.

God loves you! That’s a fact. Put that in your pipe and smoke it.

Here is what I know, because the Bible tells me so: you, and your life, are sanctified, holy because you are an expression and creation of God’s own handiwork. There is no call for false modesty here. For it is God who made you, and not you yourselves (Ps 100.3)

Consider this: God is in you. In Paul's words: Your body is a temple – whatever sort or color of body you have; no matter who you love – your body is a dwelling place for God's own Spirit. (I Cor. 6.19) Imagine that! Somebody say *Amen!*

You, who are fearfully and wonderfully made, consider this: first thing in the morning and last thing at night, say to yourself three times: *I am fearfully and wonderfully made.* Maybe, throw open the window and yell it out into the world. *Hey there world: I am fearfully and wonderfully made.*

Can you imagine that? Can you imagine everyone shouting that sentence into the world every morning and every night? *I am fearfully and wonderfully made! I am fearfully and wonderfully made! I am fearfully and wonderfully made!* This would be a different world. Don't forget to thank God for it. After all, the credit is not to you; it's to God!

Love yourself, care for yourself, by delighting in the gifts and graces of being human: of taste and touch, sound and aroma and sight. Delight in rest and leisure. Luxuriate in leisure, at least some of the time. Delight in activities that are pleasurable and give you gladness.

And this: smile. Really. Right now. Smile. Doesn't your whole being and mood change with a smile? Smile more. (I preached a whole sermon on this years ago, way before *Hamilton*.)

Here's the deal. Here's the bargain: If you love yourself enough, you will find the fortitude, the strength and endurance to go out there and fight another battle, another day. If you love yourself enough, you will find the fortitude, the strength and endurance to fight for love in a heartless world; to fight for peace in a violent world; to fight for justice in an unjust world; to fight for kindness in a merciless world; to fight for hope, to posit hope in a despairing world; to fight for your children and your grandchildren's future; to fight for God's Good News in a world jam-packed with Bad News.

When you look at it like this, from a biblical perspective, through God's eyes, love of self isn't selfish or self-serving or self-centered. Quite the opposite: it is good and it is Godly. It is necessary to a well-lived life.

Look at you. Just look at you. I feel like I am seeing you as God sees you. I see this: You are fearfully and wonderfully made.

Amen.

ⁱ *Fearfully*, archaic, meaning *awesomely*.