

February 19, 2017      Agape Love Yourself

It's February, a month that celebrates love. We are spending this month giving focused attention to the Great Commandment, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength. Love your neighbor as yourself." While it is not stated, it is implied that God named Jesus is saying, "Love your neighbor as you love yourself."

In the Great Commandment, Jesus is quoting the scripture he's learned, studied, practiced his whole life. The first part, Love the Lord your God comes from Deuteronomy 6:4. Called the Shema, Hebrew for the first words, Jewish people still today put this verse on their doors to remember when they leave the house to Love God as they go about their day. It is one of the identifying marks of being Jewish and Christian. To fee Christian is first to love God. Then, Jesus adds the second part, Love your neighbor as yourself. This comes from the 3rd book of the Bible, Leviticus, which we read today. So Jesus, who is Jewish, takes these two verses, puts them together, and says, "on these two commandments hang all the laws and the prophets. The central word in this most important commandment is Love. In ancient Greek, the word is agape.

Remember that agape love is not emotional or passionate. It isn't based on feelings. Agape love is a matter of a person's will. A person decides to agape. it is to sacrifice the self for the good of the other. Not in an en masse way, but to put the good of the individual right in front of you ahead of your own needs. Christians and people of conscience agape love our neighbors and enemies not because we like or dislike them. The feelings are inconsequential. But because the person who stands before us. We agape love from our shared humanity. We agape love because we are each a beloved child of God.

In the first letter from John, the writer explains that to agape God who we can't see is to agape our brother and sister who we can see. This sounds good. However, to love God or the person in front of us, we have to love ourself. There has to be a person, a self- with which to love. This is our focus today - agape love yourself.

For the last few weeks I've been puzzling as to how to talk about this. How does a person assess self-love? Ask yourself, "Do I love me?" When you look in the mirror, not in a narcissistic way but look in the mirror, or when you look at a photo of yourself, what is your reaction? Do you experience kindness for yourself? Joy in yourself? If you do, alleluia! For many people, getting to a place of self love takes work. It requires raising our self conscious - being aware of how you think about yourself, and why and if you think about yourself without agape love, how to get to the place where you know in your mind and trust in your heart that you love yourself.

There are many reasons that feeling self-love can be a challenge. I've thought of a couple and likely you have some as well. First, we live in a culture of consumption that makes it a challenge to experience self-love. A culture of consumption depends on convincing us that we are fundamentally unloveable because we don't look a certain way, our breath doesn't smell a certain way, our phone isn't the most up to date, and if you're a homeowner, your lawn is never perfect enough. All the advertising seeks to convince us that we are less than and so much buy more, consume more, to get to a place where we can love ourselves and be loved by others.

This is never the message from Jesus. Jesus doesn't tell us that we are loved because we spend money or look a certain way. This is the opposite of Jesus. it's un-Jesus, not Jesus. God named Jesus says, "You are my beloved." God the Creator says, "You are made in my image." God is love so we are made, everyone of us, from God's love and in God's love. You can love yourself because your essence is beloved and in your soul God is present because this is what God chooses.

IT is of course fine to dress nicely and care for our bodies, homes, phones, and cars. It's only that our love of self can not be attached to any of this. It is all fleeting. Only God and God's love for us is secure and endless. Therefore, to love yourself is to connect to that which will not leave you - God's agape.

A second place that often holds people back from self-love is a harmful experience in a church, from a pastor, priest, or church member. Too often, the church has issued judgements on people, condemning words that appear to represent God as judgmental and condemning. This is so harmful. It wounds people's spirit - maybe you've experienced this in some way and if you have, I am very sorry. In a Christian community, the central most important part is God's agape love.

There are many other factors that contribute to the difficulty of learning self-love. The result is that people feel guilt and shame rather than feeling we are beloved children of God.

To love ourselves, we need to become conscious of guilt and shame. First, these are not the same. Guilt is a feeling that comes from saying or doing something that breaks a rule. That goes against a cultural norm. For example, a cultural norm is to tell the truth. Don't lie. A person who tells a lie feels guilt. In this situation, guilt can be good because it can motivate us to examine why we lied, apologize, and change our behavior to not lie in the future.

However, often when people say, "I feel so guilty," what they mean is that they feel shame. Shame is different. Shame is the feeling and belief that I am bad. I am awful, evil. Shame means I feel there is something so intrinsically wrong with me that if someone knew they would never love me. Guilt says, "I told a lie and I feel bad." Shame says, "I am a bad person. I am a liar. I will always be a liar and I can't tell anyone about my lies or they will never love me."

Shame keeps secrets. Shame secrets erode our soul and can result in self-loathing so strong that a person can be harmful to himself or to others.

There are all kinds of problems with this but a person full of shame can not fully love another person, cannot fully love God because the self is so diminished. In telling us to agape love ourselves, God named Jesus gives us permission to let go of the shame. Loving yourself begins by recognizing that everyone of us is a beautiful broken beloved mess. Instead of hiding the hurt, instead of defining yourself by what is broken, instead, name that part within you, gather that sensitive tender part up in your heart and ask God to help you love this about yourself.

This is our most authentic self. It's the self that isn't perfect because no one is perfect. God doesn't ask for perfection. God invites us towards wholeness and spiritual maturity. No one is without flaws. Our most authentic self is aware of our flaws and gathers this up with the goodness that is you, that is God within. Everyone is broken and cracked. When we are aware of our broken parts these places can be the source of great blessing, deep love, and true beauty. This is like the often quoted line from Leonard Cohen's song, "Anthem." There is a crack in everything. That's how the light gets in.

To love ourselves as God loves us, we have to recognize the beauty in broken things. There is an amazing craft in Japan that is 500 years old. It's called *Kintsugi* which means golden connection. *Kintsugi* is the craft of taking some pottery that's broken, gluing it back together, and highlighting the broken lines with a gold finish. The tea cup or plate or serving bowl is more valuable once it's broken and fixed - filled with gold. This craft comes from the Japanese philosophy of *Wabi-sabi*. *Wabi-sabi* is to find beauty in broken things or old things. It is to have awe for what is broken, and in reverence restore that which is broken to a new wholeness. For me, this is a metaphor about learning to love yourself. It's hard even frightening to uncover the shame, see the light into the darkness, release the secrets. But this is the way we become free - Jesus said the truth will set you free - the truth is that God made you as you are and so you are loved.

To love yourself, you have to accept whatever shameful secrets you keep. You have to accept it, be kind to it, and let it be kind to you. (*On Living*, Kerry Egan, p. 8) We are each the broken piece of pottery. Accept yourself by collecting the broken bits. Be kind to yourself by gluing your bits back together. Let your brokenness be kind to you by highlighting the cracks with gold. Let the scars be kind to you, and you will be loving yourself, and you will have a self with which to love your neighbor and love God.