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Arlington Street Church
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As Thyself

Which is the greatest commandment in the law?

Jesus said, “Thou shalt love the Lord thy G*d with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like unto it: ‘Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.¹

Isn't it extraordinary that we are commanded to love ourselves? Every great world religion subscribes to some version of the Golden Rule. Every great world religion – including ours! – wants us to love ourselves.

The trick – yes, there's a trick – is to understand that there really is no “giver” and no “receiver;” each is the giver, and each the receiver. To love our neighbor *is* to love ourselves. To love ourselves is to love our neighbor.

In the Yamana Inuit initiation ceremony, the ritual in which a child becomes an adult, they say, “Do not seek to benefit only yourself, but think of other people also. If you yourself have an abundance, do not say, ‘The others do not concern me. I need not bother about them!’ If you were lucky in hunting, let others share it. Moreover, show them the favorable spots where there are many sea lions.... If you want to amass everything for yourself, other people will stay away from you, and no one will want to be with you. If you should one day fall ill, no one will visit you, because, for your part, you did not ... concern yourself about others.... [We] do not like a person who acts selfishly.” In their culture, to love others is to love oneself. It is, literally, an act of self-preservation.

What if we choose to believe that's true for us, too? What if we choose to act as if

¹ Matthew 22:36-40

it's true – that it's true, as author Caroline Myss² writes, “Generosity is not *a* way of life, but *the* way of life?” I like to say, “believing is seeing.”

When we delight in helping, our lives will be enchanted with self-love. When we give without expectation of return – when we do good for the sake of doing good – our self-love is strengthened.

By self-love, I don't mean selfish love. Selfish love is a dead-end. The love to which we are commanded in the Great Commandment is the kind of love of which the Quakers say, “Way opens.” Way opens: When we love well, there is a mysterious unfolding and manifestation of grace.

A man named Bill told the story that, as a teenager, he started getting into trouble, mostly out of desperation to call attention to things having gone very wrong at home – a cry for help. One day after school, he was hanging out at a friend's house, and he found himself really hoping they'd invite him to stay for dinner; he just didn't want to face going home.

So they “did invite me to stay for dinner,” Bill says. [And for] the first time [ever], I ... experienced a family praying together before a meal. I didn't know how to do that,” he continues, “so I just folded my hands and kept my head bowed. Then my friend's father said, 'Thank you, G*d, for bringing Billy to our table and into our family. Let him know that we would be very grateful if he would join us for dinner as often as he would like.’” Tears sprang to Bill's eyes, then; “It changed my life,” he says. “From that moment on, I valued my ... life.”³

Imagine making that kind of difference someone else's life. Guess what. You almost certainly have. And you do, every time you open your heart and extend a hand in love. And what does that do for you? To serve others is to serve ourselves.

Here's Trappist monk and mystic, Thomas Merton, from his book *No Man is an Island*: “The difficulty of [the Great Commandment] lies in the paradox that it would have us love ourselves unselfishly, because even our love of ourselves is something we owe others.

2 pronounced “Mace”

3 Caroline Myss, *Invisible Acts of Power*, pp. 118-119

“What do I mean by loving ourselves properly? I mean, first of all, desiring to live, accepting life as a very great gift and a great good, not because of what it gives us, but because of what it enables us to give to others....

“...We need others and others need us. We are not all weak in the same spots, and so we supplement and complete one another, each one making up in [ourselves] for the lack in another. Only when we see ourselves in our true human context, as members of a race intended to be one organism and 'one body,' will we begin to understand the positive importance not only of the successes but of the failures ... in our lives.”

Self-love does not necessarily come before loving others; for many of us, it's much harder to love ourselves much at all, let alone in the way we love others. But we can learn to love ourselves by loving others. And in the wake of that love comes confidence. And then, nothing will stop us for long.

Poet E.E. Cummings wrote, “We do not believe in ourselves until someone reveals that [what is] deep inside us is valuable, worth listening to, worthy of our trust, sacred to our touch. Once we believe in ourselves, we can risk curiosity, wonder, spontaneous delight, or any experience that reveals the human spirit.”

To love emboldens us. At thirty-one, a Dutchman left his medical practice in Amsterdam for South Africa, to work with people with HIV and AIDS. I'm sorry I don't know his name; I love his story. His family was unhappy with his choice to live in a faraway, often dangerous country, and work with a chronic and, in that setting, usually fatal syndrome. But he deeply believed he was fulfilling a spiritual call to serve, and that “a special grace ... had been included in his Sacred Contract.” He said, “If G*d wanted me dead, [G*d wouldn't have bothered] sending me all the way to South Africa. [G*d] could just as easily have arranged an accident in Amsterdam to save me the price of a plane ticket.”⁴

Obviously, loving others and coming to know ourselves as worthy of love can expose us to danger, and no one on a spiritual path is guaranteed a smooth path.

A police sergeant named Kaye shared this story:

“When I was twenty-three years old and a new police officer, I was working a [cold] midnight shift.... A veteran officer and I were sent to a vacant field to meet with

⁴ *Ibid*, p. 130

two homeless people.... The woman was not feeling well and I found a shelter for her, but the shelter didn't accept men, and they wanted to stay together. I didn't know what else to do, so I gave the man a dollar and a quarter, and sent them to [an] all-night restaurant where they could both drink coffee for a dollar. I told him to use the quarter to call me if her condition got worse. [They] headed for the restaurant, and the veteran officer chewed me out.... He asked me if I [were] going to give money to every homeless person. I left thinking that I had really mishandled the situation.

“Months later, I was on a different shift, and officers were calling for [backup] in reference to a man fighting. When I got there, I [saw] that it was the same homeless man. When [he] saw me, he stopped resisting. When the arresting officers got him to the police department, they put him in the holding [cell. He] became loud and disorderly, but, [again,] when he saw me, he stopped. I didn't connect his [change in behavior with] my presence until another officer asked him about it, and he told the officer about the dollar and a quarter I had given ... him.

“When I was driving him to the county jail, I asked him [what had happened in his life to bring him to this]. He told me that he [had] lived in New York with his wife, who was a nurse. ...[On] her way home from work [one night], ... some kids threw a brick ... [through] her windshield. ...[She] died in the ... crash. He [had been] an electrician.... [He] became an alcoholic, [and lost everything]....

“[Not too long ago,] ... he sent a message to me through another officer.... He wanted me to know that he was [sober,] living in an apartment now, and working [again] as an electrician....

“Whenever I think of his story,” Kaye concludes, “I ... think of the saying, 'There but for the grace of G*d go I.' ... I've learned that in life, kindness matters.”⁵

Kindness – rooted in the word for *kin*, living into the deepest meaning of kinship: seeing ourselves as members in the great human family – kindness was the way in to Kaye's self-confidence. Kindness matters, and kindness emboldens us to self-love. The Dalai Lama says, “My religion is very simple. My religion is kindness. Jewell sings, “In the end, only kindness matters.”⁶

5 *Ibid*, 133-134

6 Jewell, *Hands*

Beloved spiritual companions,

The great commandment: Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.

We can *choose* to live these beliefs:

To love our neighbor is to love ourselves: each is the giver; and each, the receiver.

Unselfishness is an act of self-preservation,
and love of ourselves is something we owe others.

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May we give thanks to those who are brought to our table,
thanks for the Sacred Contract with calls us to serve and be served,
thanks that way opens, and grace happens.

May our religion be kindness.