



ST BART'S

A Sermon by

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Love Yourself

Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, October 25, 2020

The Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost

Based on Leviticus 19:1-2, 15-18; 1 Thessalonians 2:1-8; Matthew 22:34-46

Let us pray.

*Take our lives and let them be
consecrated, Lord, to Thee;
take our moments and our days,
let them flow in ceaseless praise.
Amen.*

A few weeks ago co-host of the *Today Show* Hoda Kotb welcomed back one of her “all-time favorite guests” to talk about a topic that never gets old: that wonderful, mysterious, complicated thing called love.¹ Hoda’s conversation partner that morning was not the kind of love guru one might have initially expected. She was not turning to Dr. Ruth, the renowned German American sexologist, or Dan Savage, the salty columnist from Seattle, or Esther Perel, the Belgian American therapist known for her keen awareness of interpersonal dynamics. Hoda did not plan to contemplate the intricacies of intimate relationships with Dr. Phil, the talk show host, or Brené Brown, the self-help author, or Elizabeth Gilbert, of *Eat, Pray, Love* fame. The person Hoda was so excited to see was, of all people, a bishop in the Episcopal Church—hardly the kind of person who typically acquires “favorite guest” status on morning TV.

Episcopalians, of course, have long been aware of the magnetism of The Most Reverend Michael Curry, our Presiding Bishop. But after he preached at the royal wedding of Prince Harry and Megan Markle in April 2018, others started to pay attention as well. Now, two and a half years later, his voice is as relevant as ever. In just the past month, he’s not only joined Hoda on the *Today Show* but also made several appearances on public radio, on cable news, and on leading podcasts. His new book was published by one of the big five publishing houses and became a bestseller on Amazon.com. Even those of us in the church aren’t tired of him yet. After all, I’m not the first person to mention him this morning. My three colleagues have already invoked his name in this pulpit, during the announcements, and in our eNews in recent weeks. Episcopalian or not, we can’t seem to get enough of this bishop and the way of love he leads us on.

Bishop Curry’s appeal, I think, lies in his ability to cast a wide net and speak candidly from the heart. He does not ignore the political implications of the Good News, nor does he sidestep intellectual rigor when it is necessary. Yet his primary goal is not to market a particular partisan initiative or to delve into an intricate theological debate. Bishop Curry aims, first and foremost, to share a very simple message: God is love, and by loving others we can change the world. “Love,” Curry writes, “unselfish, sacrificial,

¹ <https://www.today.com/video/bishop-michael-curry-talks-about-his-new-book-love-is-the-way-92307013574>.

unconditional, and liberating love—is the way, frankly, the only way, to realize God’s dream of the beloved community, on earth as it is in heaven. It’s the only thing that can, and that ever will, make the world a better place.”²

In his reflections on love, Bishop Curry often turns to passages like the one from Matthew we heard this morning, in which Jesus, drawing on Hebrew scripture, tells a lawyer that the two greatest commandments are “Love your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind” and “Love your neighbor as yourself.” On these two commandments, Jesus instructs the lawyer, hang all the law and the prophets. As far as Christian teachings about love go, it’s pretty standard stuff, but I nonetheless find Bishop Curry’s regular use of the pericope intriguing. When paraphrasing this passage and the two passages in Mark and Luke that are like it, Bishop Curry usually makes a subtle but important change in the framing of the two commandments. “Love God,” he says. “Love your neighbors. And while you’re at it, love yourself.”³ An assumption implicit in the original selection from Leviticus becomes explicit in Bishop Curry’s version: loving God and loving others aren’t the only tasks that are worthy of our efforts; it’s important for us to love ourselves, too.

Halfway through my college years, I underwent a psychological evaluation as part of my ordination process—the process I had to follow in order to become a priest. I was a psychology major in college and I had enjoyed therapy, so I was actually pretty excited about this step. I researched every psychologist on the list provided to me by the diocese and selected the most impressive one, an eminent researcher who led a therapist training program at a prominent local university. But as our first appointment approached, I began to get nervous. I had been wanting to become a priest for quite some time and I had done my best to keep myself as spotless—and as worthy of the priesthood—as possible. I was a goody two shoes par excellence. I hadn’t even tasted alcohol besides communion wine because I was only twenty years old and it was against the law for me to drink. Still, I worried that I wasn’t good enough: that the few mistakes I had made disqualified me, that I wasn’t adequately kind, that I hadn’t sufficiently stepped out of my privileged upbringing to care for those less fortunate than myself.

At the end of my final session with the psychologist, she told me that she wanted to share with me the contents of her report to the bishop. “You’re obviously a very smart, capable young man,” she said, “and you have a lot to offer the Church.” “But,” she added, “the one thing that concerns me is that you’re a little bit inhibited.” She went on to explain that in her role as a trainer of therapists she observed how challenging it was for more inhibited therapists to effectively treat their clients. “It’s not that you won’t be able to do the work,” she told me. “It’s that it will be more difficult for you to do it. If you don’t care enough for yourself, if you don’t give yourself permission to have fun and live fully, it will be harder for you to care for others.” The problem was not, as I had assumed, that I had cared too little about other people, that I had not successfully molded myself into the perfect, self-sacrificial priest. The problem was that I had cared too little about myself, that I had been too willing to restrict and restrain myself in order to fit an idealized image of who I thought I should be.

The therapist, with her years of experience and education, taught me a valuable lesson that day: love is not a zero-sum proposition. It is possible to love oneself, to love one’s neighbor, and to love God simultaneously. In fact, it is ideal. Love of self, love of neighbor, and love of God are all interconnected. When we love ourselves, we honor the divine image within and equip ourselves to love our neighbors. When we love our neighbors, we honor the divine image in them and create a better society in which we will remain a part. When we love God, we remind ourselves and our neighbors of the larger, cosmic picture and of our small but significant places within it.

² Michael Curry, *Love is the Way*, 6.

³ See, for example, the “Royal Wedding sermon”: <https://www.episcopalnewsservice.org/2018/05/19/video-text-presiding-bishops-royal-wedding-sermon/>.

“Too many Christians,” the feminist theologian Beverly Wildung Harrison laments, “even of the progressive sort, still believe...that an irresolvable theological and moral tension exists between self-assertive or self-interested acts (that is, those involved in the struggle for our/my liberation) and ‘loving’ or ‘good’ Christian acts.” In contrast, she explains, many feminist theologians affirm that “there is no ontological split between self [and] other; there is no monolithic polarity of self-interested action versus other-regardingness. All people—each of us-in-relation-to-all—have a mandate, rooted in God, to the sort of self-assertion that grounds and confirms our dignity in relationship. Self-assertion is basic to our moral well-being. The human struggle for liberation is precisely the struggle to create material, spatial, and temporal conditions for all to enjoy centered, self-determined social existence.”⁴ Harrison powerfully encourages us to consider a way of envisioning love that allows for the flourishing of everyone. The question isn’t whether to love our neighbors *or* ourselves. The question is how to love our neighbors *and* ourselves—and how to love God by doing both.

“Unselfish, sacrificial living,” Bishop Curry writes in his latest book, “isn’t about ignoring or denying or destroying yourself. It’s about discovering your true self—the self that looks like God—and living life from that grounding.”⁵ “The ability to love yourself,” he continues, “is intimately related to your capacity to love others....When you discover your nature and live into it, self-love radiates. Others feel it and benefit from it. Your joy gives you an energy that helps you to love others as yourself.”⁶ Further, he claims, if our love for ourselves is insufficient, our love for our neighbors will be insufficient as well: “loving the self is a required balance. If we fail in that, we fail our neighbor, too.”⁷

It is true that, as we continue to battle an historic pandemic, and as we approach an election in which healthcare, the economy, and racial justice play pivotal roles, lack of concern for others seems as prominent as ever in our national life. We face questions when we choose (or not) to don our masks, when we enter the voting booth, and at many other points during the present moment about the extent to which we are willing to love our neighbors and the extent to which we are willing to love ourselves. It is easy, when contemplating the state of our public discourse, to get depressed about the state of our nation and the state of our souls. But I’d like to propose that what often masquerades as selfish cruelty is actually, at its root, a lack of adequate foresight—an unwillingness to fully consider or admit the ultimate impact our actions will have on everyone, including ourselves. Those who refuse to wear masks are putting themselves at risk in addition to others; those who refuse to address pervasive inequalities are exacerbating tensions within societies they too call their own. We do need to expand our collective imagination—to stretch our capacity to love God and to love one another—but we may be able to make a significant amount of progress on that score simply by thinking more carefully about what is truly in our best interests. Perhaps we’ll discover that, in the end, love of God, love of neighbor, and love of self are really the same thing.

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⁴ Beverly Wildung Harrison, “Theological Reflection in the Struggle for Liberation,” in *Making the Connections: Essays in Feminist Social Ethics*, ed. Carol S. Robb, 241, as quoted in *Self Love and Christian Ethics*, Darlene Fozard Weaver, 64-65.

⁵ Curry, *Love is the Way*, 96.

⁶ Ibid, 96, 117.

⁷ Ibid, 96.