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Love Your Neighbor – Luke 10:22-25

Here we are in the middle of this three-sermon series on a seven-word condensed version of the teacher of the law's conversation with Jesus: Love God, Love Your Neighbor, Prove It.

Last week, we looked at Love God, realizing that both words in that statement are pretty abstract, trying to help you find something concrete to help you bring "Love" and "God" to life for you, and sent you home to see how you can make this, the Greatest Commandment, not just a part of your faith, but your life as well.

Now, we look at the second part. In the other Gospels, Jesus calls this the second greatest commandment, and implies strongly that the two can't be separated; here in Luke, Jesus affirms what the legal scholar says: "Love your neighbor as yourself."

Love your neighbor. Sounds, well, neighborly. The whole of the Hebrew Scriptures, the Old Testament, is full of examples and commands from God, from the prophets, to care for strangers, for people in need; but this statement, from Leviticus 19:18, says "neighbor." The person who lives close to you.

The Hebrew word that we translate “neighbor” is *reyah*, which means “neighbor, companion, someone other than you,” even “a relative.” The root word underneath has to do with sheep grazing together as a flock: those *with you*. So, the image is that we’re all in this together.

You know, it can be a whole lot easier caring for a relative or friend coming in for a few days from another state than it can be getting along with one who lives just a few doors down the street. What’s kind of funny about all this is that it’s often said the person or persons we treat worst are those we love the most. To bring this even closer, remember that the whole commandment is “love your neighbor *as you love yourself*.” Hm. That opens a whole new can of worms.

Last week, we talked about loving God in other human beings, because if we are indeed made in the image of God, as the Bible tells us (God created humanity in his own image, in the image of God he created them, male and female God created them – Gn 1:26, 5:1b), then looking at another human being should be at least a little like looking at God. We can get that, perhaps. Problem is, most of us have an entirely different view of *ourselves*.

Now, you may well be the exception to this, but in my years of counseling and working with people, once you get down under the surface stuff of ego and bravado and such, we don’t always love

ourselves very much. Honestly, how many of you – don't raise your hand – can say that you truly love yourself? If you do, do you act like it? Oh, we may treat ourselves really well, indulge and luxuriate, but do you treat yourself as an actual image of God? Do you treat your body as a temple of God, like a precious thing, carefully watching what you do, eating right and getting the proper amount of rest and exercise; do you take care to avoid habits and behaviors that are harmful or dangerous? Do you? All the time?

It might be worthwhile to consider this commandment from this perspective. "Love your neighbor as yourself" doesn't amount to much if you don't take care of your *own* self, does it?

Perhaps the commandment might just be better phrased, "love your neighbor *far better* than yourself." Abraham, when three men come walking up to his camp in the desert, kills the best calf he's got and has Sarah get out the best food they have for their guests; they're treating strangers better than they'd treat themselves if it were just going to be the two of them at the dinner table – and it turns out that, as the letter to the Hebrews says, that they "entertained angels unawares."

But maybe I'm getting too far ahead.

Perhaps we better start off at home base, with you and me, which, though we may wish to forget it, were also made in the image of God, are a temple of God, and are loved by God with a tenacious love that

even sacrificed his own son to save. Yes, God loved you and me so much that he sacrificed his *son*, his child, for us.

Can you give worth to yourself? Can you consider yourself *of worth*? None of us is worthy; but do we have *worth*?

One of the more interesting people I met working in drug and alcohol rehabilitation was a gentleman named Ergo. That's right – Ergo, as in the Latin word meaning “therefore.”

Now, honestly, what sort of parent names their child “Ergo”? It certainly didn't do much for this guy. He was six-foot-eight, weighed somewhere around three hundred fifty pounds, and to hear him tell it, was mad at the world the moment he came out of the womb. After all, with a name like that, you can bet life on the playground for him was something of an adventure.

So he grew up different. He always felt he had something to prove, like he was inadequate. (By the way, this is just the way he told his story to me.)

Lots of people feel like this, perhaps you have too – perhaps you still do. But you and I probably expressed or repressed that feeling in ways that someone the size of a Smart car didn't need to: intimidation and violence were Ergo's way of life, and because people tend to avoid you when they feel you're a risk to life and limb, Ergo managed to make his sense of being different, his isolation, even stronger. Religion? That

was for people who needed help; he certainly didn't. God? For wimps. Who needs God when you can influence on others just by standing close to them?

But despite his power and his attitude, he didn't like himself. He didn't really like pushing others away, which happened even when he didn't want to. He was a very scary person, and he found that alcohol took away that feeling of being different, different in a bad way, and so he drank as much as often as he could until he *couldn't not* drink.

And then, finally, God broke in and got past that huge frightened child that was Ergo. By the time I met him, when he went to an AA meeting and introduced himself, he would say, "Hi, my name is Ergo, and I am the loving child of a loving God." And he lived that statement out. Surprisingly, people didn't stand ten feet away when they talked to him anymore; police didn't reflexively put their hands on their weapons when he encountered them.

He discovered that God loved him even if he didn't like himself, that God didn't care if he was scary, that God could and would forgive his dismal past, simply because Ergo wanted to change, was willing to change, and took steps to change. He began to like himself, and then he began to be comfortable in his own enormous skin, and then he learned to love God, and then he learned to love himself, which he started to do just on principle because he believed God thought he was worth loving,

and if God thought he was worth loving, who was he to disagree? In the process, he discovered he could love other people, too – and other people loved him, which is why he always called himself the “loving child of a loving God.”

So. I’ve led you down a twisty path. Here’s your assignment for this week: what is it in you that you aren’t comfortable with? What don’t you like about YOU? This isn’t an excuse for self-flagellation, now. Offer what you don’t like about you to God. Offer it as a gift – because it has just brought you closer to him. God loves you despite whatever it is. God already knows it, for heaven’s sake. Believe the words of Paul to the church in Rome: “I have become absolutely convinced that neither death nor life, neither messenger of heaven nor monarch of earth, neither what happens today nor what may happen tomorrow, neither a power on high nor a power from below, nor anything else in all God’s creation has any power to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Romans 8 *passim*, Phillips paraphrase)

You may not believe that now, but I can absolutely guarantee if you keep on acting as if it’s true, you will end up believing it.

Now, blessed and loved and forgiven by God as you are, can you love your neighbor? Love yourself as God loves you – and then love your neighbor as yourself.