

Sermon Notes: October 31, 2021

Focus: God, neighbor, and fear

[Lectionary Readings](#)

... The first is, 'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.' The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these."

This scripture is the most obvious of them all: love God, love neighbor. Fifteen years ago, a diocesan youth director had the opening invocation at convention. It was the shortest invocation that I have ever heard. He caught us all off guard when, clocking in at under 30 seconds, he finished with "love Jesus and don't be a jerk."

I have been thinking a lot of about the mechanics of loving your neighbor. I think most of us do a decent job. We work hard to be kind. We are not rude in our day-to-day life. We don't go into attack mode when people do things we don't like. However, we often leave out two essential elements of the golden rule: love **ourselves** and love our **fears**. Loving ourselves seems obvious but fear less so.

Fear It's sort of the reason for the Halloween. Maybe you don't care for zombies and blood, but what bumps-in-the-night cause you to fear? Maybe you could be grateful for your fear. I don't mean coddling your fears or letting them run over you. I do mean letting your fear remind you that weakness is a vacuum that God's strength can fill. If you don't like that, at least you can be grateful for fear's persistence. In their own nagging ways, our fears point us to love's healing power. When your fears are eased, you have more strength to help others with their fears.

In the right "dosage," fear is God's gift. Fear helps you not stick your hand on a stove. But it's the fearful stewing that creates sort of an autoimmune disorder. Hear me -- it's not a failure of personal grit if you are beset with fear. But you can take your unmanageable fear and offer it up as a prayer, a prayer that may take your whole life to be answered.

I offer you a quasi-AA prayer: "Fear has made my life unmanageable (Step 1) and I ask God (higher power in AA language) to restore me (Step 2) and make me less afraid." I don't want to sound simplistic, but do you love yourself? Self-love is an excellent fear antidote, and God is good giving you the right dosage. Unchecked, autoimmune fears convince you that you are basically unlovable and deserve nothing.

Disclaimer: therapy, medication, and recovery work are part of the miracle of healing.

Self-Love Self-love is not tolerance. Tolerance is the poor relation to love. With God's help, you will not just tolerate yourself, but also marvel that you are lovable. Sometimes we reserve the harshest words for ourselves. We are literally our worst enemy. Jesus says that you shall love your neighbor as *yourself*. This is the real superpower. With God's help, self-love can spread from you to others. You can only give what you have found in yourselves.

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