

1 John 3:16-24

The Message (MSG)

¹⁶⁻¹⁷ This is how we've come to understand and experience love: Christ sacrificed his life for us. This is why we ought to live sacrificially for our fellow believers, and not just be out for ourselves. If you see some brother or sister in need and have the means to do something about it but turn a cold shoulder and do nothing, what happens to God's love? It disappears. And you made it disappear.

When We Practice Real Love

¹⁸⁻²⁰ My dear children, let's not just talk about love; let's practice real love. This is the only way we'll know we're living truly, living in God's reality. It's also the way to shut down debilitating self-criticism, even when there is something to it. For God is greater than our worried hearts and knows more about us than we do ourselves.

²¹⁻²⁴ And friends, once that's taken care of and we're no longer accusing or condemning ourselves, we're bold and free before God! We're able to stretch our hands out and receive what we asked for because we're doing what he said, doing what pleases him. Again, this is God's command: to believe in his personally named Son, Jesus Christ. He told us to love each other, in line with the original command. As we keep his commands, we live deeply and surely in him, and he lives in us. And this is how we experience his deep and abiding presence in us: by the Spirit he gave us.

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1 John 3:16-24

...As You Love Yourself

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I know that some of you are familiar with the neurotic voice inside Anne LaMott's head because you've read her writing. That voice has a great sense of humor and a knack for getting to the heart of real life problems. This past New Year's she posted her Anti-Diet to Facebook, and that article made its rounds again this week. In it she hides a truth about healthy eating. As she was trying to help a few of the women at her church get a handle on their relationship with food, she told them essentially to feed themselves as they would feed their pastor. She said, "They wouldn't say, "Here Pastor--let's eat standing up in the kitchen. This tube of barbecue Pringles is all for you. I have my own" And then stand there gobbling from their own tubular container. No, they'd get out pretty dishes, and arrange wonderful foods on the plates, and set one plate before Veronica at the table, a plate filled with love, pride and connection."

I think that's a fabulous way of reminding ourselves of the axioms that Jesus sets out for us in Scripture. Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. Love your neighbor as you love yourself. Feeding in our holy book is a sign of love and care – just like it is, or maybe how it's meant to be in our world today. But the truth is – there's a can of Pringles sitting in my pantry. It's not a food I particularly associate with love, maybe with picnics, but not so much with the kind of grace Anne LaMott is describing here.

So we get to today's passage, and it is another Midrash on these commandments. A Midrash is the custom borne out of Judaism that suggests that the best way to understand a

teaching is to find multiple ways to re-teach it. We examine it from every angle, every viewpoint, every association. It's coming up with an anti-diet, it's taking the sayings of Jesus and asking over and over again, what do they mean?

This particular Midrash from the first letter of John is speaking about Jesus' commandments, but I think it has one in particular in mind because it's talking about love. In fact I think it's really a commentary on one particular word in Jesus' saying, "Love your neighbor as you love yourself." It's about the AS. What are the things on the two sides of that equation? How do you possibly make them equal? What does it mean to love your neighbor AS you love yourself?

In God's eyes, and in Jesus' teaching, both loving others AND loving ourselves are important. Both are valued and recognized as worthy of love. Getting the balance right in both of those relationships is tough.

We all know people who are out of balance:

Narcissists – love themselves too much

Doormats – love themselves too little

Our internal dialogue is important because our messaging matters.

How do we think about ourselves?

How do we think about others?

But then the text reminds us that God is greater than our worried hearts. God is also greater than our troubled minds. And God loves us in our imperfect bodies. It's OK to let go of the accusing condemning voices – no matter which direction they are turned.

Religion unfortunately sometimes is the very thing that tells us to keep that inner critic going. Either we're not good enough. Or those other people aren't good enough. God is set up as being the punisher – and that's not who God is. We misread the sacrifice of Jesus as the punishment of all punishments, when what we're really doing is hurting ourselves. Jesus put himself out there so that we would know the depths of God's love and maybe even learn that we can make sacrifices too and not just be out for ourselves.

I hear often that people today want to get rid of the word "sin" – that it's too much of a downer, that it makes them "feel bad" or "judged." The word sin doesn't bother me much. I do think sin is a reality in our world. But I think this love equation is really what's intended to bring us back to balance, to help us not hurt others or be unkind to ourselves.

As this lesson teaches, it is in keeping these commandments, the love commandments, that we live deeply and surely in Christ. This is how we experience his deep and abiding presence in us. It is the Spirit at work in us.