

Matthew 12:33-35; 22:34-40
Mark 7:14-23
John 7:37-39

LOVE FROM THE DARK SIDE

If I love you, I want you to love yourself. If I respect and admire you, I want you to think well of yourself. I may not be totally consistent because of my own inner flaws, and special circumstances may send contradictory messages from time to time. But essentially, the vast majority of the time, if I love you, I want you to love yourself. It troubles me if you do not. And it is not just that I cannot stand disagreement. Something deeper than information or education assures me that if you do not regard, like, appreciate – well, love – yourself, things cannot go very well for very long. Opportunities will be missed. Blessings will be warded off. True destiny and purpose will be missed. True identity will never be discovered. Furthermore, you cannot love me back, not very well or genuinely – at least according to Jesus – if you do not love yourself. (Matthew 19:19; 22:39; Mark 12:31; Luke 10:29)

Now, maybe you cannot love yourself on your own hook, by your own authority or whim. I deeply believe that to be true. Some outside person has to love us first, or we cannot love ourselves. But if I love you, isn't that at least some evidence for reconsidering former negative assessments and conclusions? It depends, of course, on how big and true my love is. Nevertheless, is this not the core issue in all parenthood? If the kids finally figure out that you truly and genuinely love them, things will be fine. I did not say easy, or automatic. But they will figure out that they are valuable, and they will try to make something of their lives in a way that simply cannot happen if they do not love themselves. Only, it cannot be faked. Pretending does not work. That is why "love on the assembly line" – as we mentioned last week – does not work. If we only "pretend love" for someone – just to fix them or get them to behave better – then they end up "pretend loving" themselves. The fixing will be only skin deep, and the hoped-for behavior will have no roots or endurance.

We could all save ourselves a lot of unnecessary pain and avoid a lot of dead-end streets if we could only remember the principle. That is, we should know right away that if people don't want us to love ourselves, then they don't really love us either, no matter what they say or how they try to make it look. If they want us to improve ourselves

so they can love us, instead of wanting us to love ourselves so we can improve – well, you can still be polite, but pay no more attention to them. Their caring is counterfeit, and you will never get from them anything you really want or need. They will never be happy with you or happy *for* you – not ever – unless of course they get converted, get born anew: find out that somebody genuinely loves *them*.

That let the cat out of the bag. We are talking about Christian theology – the core of the Gospel. God loves us, really and truly, and so God wants us to love ourselves. And in the wake of that, in response to that, we become more and more our true selves all along the WAY. Only, most of us do not dare to trust or count on God’s love very deeply until we see it proclaimed and acted out by Jesus Christ, and feel the presence of His Holy Spirit with us everywhere we go. It is, nevertheless, God’s problem with all of us. Because God loves us, God wants us to love ourselves. But we are forever trying to duck it, dodge it, delay it, dispute it, doubt it, deny it. I could go on but you already know what I mean. (Despise it, disregard it, disclaim it, defer it, deflect it, debate it, and, worst of all, deserve it. We keep trying to deserve it.) God loves you and *wants* you to love yourself. Any preacher or any church that does not help you to know this and move toward it is the Antichrist. Probably most of you would find it hard to believe, but I have actually known some people who got mixed up with preachers and churches that really did not want them to love themselves.

Do you ever find that your ear gets tuned to a special frequency for a while? Lately my ear has been fine-tuned to all the self-deprecating remarks that people make about themselves. Most of them are healthy, normal, competent, wonderful people. And most of us look for assurance and contradiction from time to time, half consciously I suppose. So I am not raising a big alarm. But do you ever wonder if all this self-mutilation is having a bigger effect than we realize? “I’m so stupid.” “I’ll never learn.” “There I go again.” “What a [nerd, jerk, klutz, goof-off, doofus, idiot].” “I’m so [greedy, selfish, lazy, inconsiderate, mindless, hateful, impatient].” These are all direct quotes from some of you in just this past week. That is, there are people sitting here in God’s sanctuary this morning who can remember saying these very things about themselves within the past few days. I will be kind and not ask them to raise their hands.

If you were thumbing through *National Geographic* magazine and came upon articles telling about how various groups, ancient or modern, lashed themselves with bone-tipped whips, cut themselves with knives,

or slept on nails, you would say, “How terrible! Why would anybody do that to themselves?” You think that just because you don’t live in a monastery, you are never hard on yourself? Sometimes brutal and cruel to yourself? You still believe that these jabs and wounds and insults you give to yourself will help you to improve? Have they ever?

Our society is chock-full of groups and concerns trying to stop all the damage, abuse, injustice, and unfairness coming from the outside. Who is trying to stop the damage, abuse, injustice, and unfairness coming from the inside, where it is frequently even worse, and frequently even the source of what is happening on the outside?

Anyway, I keep running into people who act displeased with themselves. Some of them feel like they have missed a turn back down the road somewhere, or they never quite put all the pieces together, or something about who they are does not match a deeper identity they sense within. Aware of this “lack,” they seem eager to make accusing or cutting remarks about themselves before anybody else can take a shot at it, as if they were announcing: “I know I’m not what I should be, but I already know it, so you don’t need to mention it (please).”

Along with this, and I suspect closely related, I keep running into people who feel badly toward themselves for certain characteristics or character traits that have apparently caused them trouble over and over again. They have perhaps tried to get rid of these “faults,” but to no avail. Trying to keep the damage to a minimum, they go among us sounding the warning, much like lepers used to do. “I’m really very stubborn.” “I have this terrible temper.” “There’s my greed coming out again.” “I can’t get over this fear.” “I have a problem with procrastination.” Do you know what procrastination is? *Crastinus* = tomorrow. It is an excessive love of tomorrow. Literally, a putting of things into tomorrow.

Most people do not admit to being lustful these days. Greed, pride, sloth, anger, and the rest of the Seven Deadly Sins are okay to mention, but lust is not an “in” sin today. It does not bring much pleasant or understanding attention. There is still a lot of conversation about relationships, why they are hard, and why they keep getting into the same unhappy patterns. Maybe people think there is no more lust in our time because if anybody wants sex today, they can get it. But lust is wanting *anything* from another person without having any genuine consideration for that person. You can lust after a person for their security, position, fame, wisdom, or wealth just as much as for their body. You can even lust for

someone's attention and have no real desire to give them any of yours. And by the way, getting married does not automatically solve or resolve our lust on any level. I don't know who started that rumor.

Have I missed anybody so far? Some of you think I am right on the border of being exclusive sometimes, but I don't want anybody to feel left out. I believe in predestination: I believe we are all born into sin – that is, born into an imperfect world, and born unaware of the love and presence and purposes of God (sin = separation, alienation) – and I believe we are all destined to be found by God and brought into God's eternal Kingdom. And I also believe that it takes less time and travail if we catch on and start to cooperate a little. Is it cooperating to keep insulting yourself?

If you call yourself “stupid,” who does that insult – you or your Creator? If you call yourself greedy or lustful or lazy, who does that insult – you or your Creator? I grant you that we all act in greed or lust or sloth from time to time. But is that the mainframe of how we were created, or is that an aberration – a temporary choice that is out of tune and off the mark? If it were the mainframe, you would feel no guilt, no dissatisfaction, no sense that something was wrong.

How pride sneaks up on us! We think we have created ourselves – that we are to be blamed or praised for everything about us? If we didn't want to be selfish, stupid, or greedy, why did we build those characteristics into ourselves when we were so busily forming ourselves in the womb? Oh yeah ... I remember now: *“Know ye that the LORD is God: it is he that hath made us, and not we ourselves; we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture.”* (Psalm 100:3)

None of it was our idea. We were never asked if we liked the setup or the makeup. We find ourselves ready-made. Not fully formed, not completely developed, but ready-made. Clearly it is not our choice, none of our business, and not our prerogative to decide if we like it – only how we will use it. We keep wasting time and life trying to assess whether or not we like the package – whether or not we will finally agree to accept and like ourselves. Since we got it all for nothing, I suspect a little appreciation would be in order, but our real business is to explore the given potential, use it, figure out what it will do and what it is for – and to keep practicing and training to get the most we can out of the design. But the design itself is not our doing, and it is truly fruitless to spend time figuring out if we approve of it or like it.

So then it must eventually occur to me also: If I call you greedy, who do I insult? You or your Creator? If I think you did a greedy thing and we sit down and talk about it, and either I misunderstood or you got carried away, and maybe one of us will change our minds about what is going on – fine. But if I call *you* greedy, who do I insult? I am going to end up in deep trouble if I keep taking on the Author and Designer of who you really are.

None of this means we have outlived all our problems or that we have no adjustments or improvement to make in our behavior – our outward expressions of who we are. But we cannot remember too often that it all depends upon our learning to TRUST THE DESIGNER. There is nothing wrong with the framework, the makeup, the basic design. That is what we keep wanting to blame, but that is never the real problem. It is what we do with it – how we use it – that needs to be changed, but never the design.

How can I say it so that maybe at least one more person today will “hear it” and understand it. I was talking to a young minister a few days ago who was getting very upset and very afraid because of all his sexual urges. He had them under control, barely, but did not know how long he could keep them there, and it was causing him great anguish and guilt that he had any of these feelings at all. I said, “Are you crazy? You think God wants the race to go extinct? How do you think you got here?! Sexual urges are part of the design, part of the mainframe. If you think *they* are the problem, you *will* shake apart. The first thing you have to do is accept your sexuality, and all its urgings, as part of God’s design – as a gift, a blessing. Never be ashamed of that, or you insult your Creator.”

It took about an hour of argument to get some of that through, and it would have taken far longer if we had not already had a lot of trust between us. “Now,” I said, “trusting the Designer for this wondrous gift, we know there are ways to use the gift which bring honor to the Creator and build up the creatures the Creator loves. And there are ways to use the gift which bring pain and separation, and work to destroy the purposes of the Creator.” That took about five minutes. Of course, this was a fast study. Then we spoke of the three major ways to keep the gift focused on its rightful purpose and in line with the Creator’s will. But we were no longer trying to change the design, or insult it, or pretend that it was wrong or evil in and of itself. What a relief! What a beautiful day, when we step into the Creator’s flow and purpose instead of trying to fight the whole design of LIFE itself just because we know things will be

bad if we start getting it all out of focus. Besides that, it is exhausting to fight the Creator. And we will lose the fight if we struggle against the design itself. We end up doing evil instead of good, if we cannot learn how to cooperate with the design and the Designer.

That is only a tiny illustration. The precept is much bigger. Conversion does not change your personality – it integrates it. Being born anew does not change your gene pool – it aligns it with God’s love and purpose for you.

Most people have a stubborn streak. (And we are all so very proud of it, aren’t we?) But among us there are some so bull-headed that they can barely listen to any suggestion from any source, even sometimes from within themselves. Where others see a hundred possibilities, they see two – and resent the other one. Maybe you are not like that, but suppose you were. You could spend your whole life trying to change this characteristic (and probably some of the people around you have devoted their lives to changing it too). But it would come to nothing. It is built-in to your design. Then maybe one day you start asking, “I wonder why the Lord my Maker gave me this strange, peculiar, weird kind of gift that keeps getting me into so much trouble?” And if you keep tracking that line of wonderment, you might eventually come to realize that, again and again, your purpose here has to do with establishing, defending, and protecting some people and/or some things you really believe in. You might increasingly realize that your assignments from the Lord send you into situations where bull-dogged determination (“patient endurance” was the old Christian term) is precisely what is needed. So you will never be a butterfly. You will never have as many friends as some others you used to envy. You will never be as light-hearted and easygoing as you always thought mature Christian people were supposed to be. But there are some people on the planet who thank God for you, and who say there has never been a more loyal, dependable, trustworthy, fearless friend than you have been for them. And you will know that at times you held things together and stood through some storms that most “normal” people could not have endured. And if that is why you are here, then it is okay to be you. Trust the Designer!

What am I leading up to? A preacher is supposed to make the point and then illustrate it. I have tried to illustrate it and now I want to make the point ... if you will stretch for it. It is very important for us to come to God with our evil and our sin. We never want to do that. Everything within us cries out that we may not survive even if we come

to God with the very best that we have, so what chance is there if we come to God with what we are most troubled by and most ashamed of? And so, while knowing we cannot really hide anything from God, we try to put our best self forward and pray none of the other subjects will come up, at least not directly during those times when we realize that we are in God's presence. But it is very important for us to come to God on purpose with our evil and our sin. Despite what you may have been told, God will not take it away – not in any of the ways we think. God will redirect it, show us a different usage, show us what it is for. That is never what we start out asking for. So if we are not very quiet and patient, we miss it.

Christianity never works if we come only from the good side. No matter how much we believe in the love of God or trust Jesus to have revealed it, it comes most clearly through betrayal, desertion, being forsaken – and a Cross that could never have happened except by incredible, unjustified evil. We all have a dark side that cannot be reached by pretending we are only the children of light. Often this dark side sneers, and works to destroy any influence of truth or joy in our lives. But for many humans, down through all the centuries, it has been this dark side that eventually responds most deeply to genuine love and light.

We read some passages today about the heart. But in one of Jesus' more terrifying teachings, He reminds us that evil also comes from the heart. And the commandment is: "*You shall love the Lord your God with all of your heart.*" Do you know what it means to be a half-hearted Christian? "The trouble with most liberal Protestants," said my old mentor, Frank Weiskel, "is that their religion is all above the waist." They leave out all the fire, the passion, the zeal, the conviction. You have to want God with more than your mind, or this world will steal him from you.

Worship means to submit, to dedicate, to lay all that we have and all that we are before the Lord and say, "You may do anything you wish with any and all that I have and am." That means the dark goes on the altar right alongside the light. We cannot be whole until we love God with all of our hearts – the dark side too: the whole package, come what may.

Years ago I went to an AA meeting where a fellow was talking about the incredible spiritual program he had found in AA. He would never have come, he said, if he had realized it was a spiritual path. His only

reason to darken the doors of AA was to see if there was any help for him (though he doubted it) before he drank himself to death. After many months of working the program, he began to realize that not only was he getting help that kept him from taking the next drink, he was also beginning to find a new way of life that was changing everything for him. He said, simply and humbly, “I came in here to save my ass, and found out my soul was connected to it.”

Many of you are coming from the other direction. Your lives have been mostly proper, responsible, nice, and good. But you need to make the same connection. I know, of course, that some of you come here neither to save nor be saved. If you don't know what you are here for, you are still very welcome, but I do wish you would keep out of the way. Some of us have very serious business here. It is not just a game for us. Our very lives depend on it. And if you are one who came in here to save your soul, you need to make the same discovery as my AA friend, only the other way around. Half-hearted and half-saved do not work. You must learn to bring your dark side to God also. Bring the anger, and the fear. Bring the resentment, jealousy, lust, greed, and all the rest. Lay it on the altar along with all you know to be most beautiful and true. And say, “Lord, I didn't invent any of this stuff. I don't know what it is for or what good can come from it. But it is part of me. I don't know how I can possibly love and serve you with any of this stuff – dark or light – but from now on, you are getting all of me.”

You will get some strange and fascinating guidance from the Holy Spirit if you do that. You will get some wonderful hugs from the Holy Spirit too. The saints always have, once they learned to bring it all. And from it comes a whole new level of power and devotion, and awareness and delight. But why believe me? If you haven't already, go find out for yourself.