

## “The Two Great Commandments: Loving Ourselves”

Mary Henderson Bowman

Date: November 12, 2023



This morning we are making the move from the first of the two great commandments<sup>1</sup> — to the second one.

Over the last four weeks, we have followed the call to love God with our whole beings through the road map that Jesus named.

That journey has taken us through our minds, our hearts, our strength, and our souls — and at long last, we have landed at “the self.”

What is the self?

The self deals with the all-important questions of identity and worth.

Identity tells us who we really are and whose we are.

Worth tells us that we are valuable.

Another way of saying this . . . the self wants to know itself and be known and the self wants to love itself and be loved.

The self wants to be known for itself and all of its imperfections — and still be loved and valued.

In a broken world with imperfect people, this is not always an easy path.

This morning we are telling the tale of two selves.

For centuries our church mothers and fathers have understood that we have competing selves and they called these two selves — the true self and the false self.

Our true self is soul-like. The true self knows that its identity and worth come only from God. The true self loves others but doesn't look for its identity and worth to come from others. The true self understands that it belongs to God, that it is loved by God, that its purpose lies in God, and that it can only be made whole through God's love. The true self knows that to be known and loved requires divine love.

One the other hand, the false self is grounded in what other people think. The false self houses its identity in the perceptions of others, and the false self puts its worth in the hands of others.

The false self is best understood if we go back to when each of us were young and growing up.

Even before we begin to talk, we begin to collect information about ourselves from the people around us and the different ways they react to us.

Every time we interact with others we are given information about how we are perceived.

Sometimes the feedback is positive . . .

“I love that tie you picked out.”

“Doesn't your haircut look good.”

“You did such a nice job on your presentation.”

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<sup>1</sup> Mark 12:28-34

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“I don’t know anyone who sings as beautifully as you do.”

Sometimes the feedback is negative.

“What on earth made you think splashing in the puddles was a good idea?”

“Why can’t you be more like your sister?”

“That presentation was the worst I ever heard.”

“You have made such a mess of things.”

Sometimes the feedback is true.

“Hospitality is one of your gifts. You always make me feel so welcome.”

Sometimes the feedback is false.

“You’re such a cry baby. Only babies cry.” [Not true.]

“You will never amount to much.” [Not true.]

The result is that we get hurt and we get wounded.

We feel that we are “less than” compared to others.

We don’t feel valued.

We don’t feel that who we really are is always welcome around others.

We do not feel known and we do not feel loved for who we are.

It is the false self who initially comes to the rescue.

The false self sees the wounds and rushes in to cover them and protect them from further injury.

The false self covers the wounds by creating a system for the self to find its own identity and worth.

Sometimes the false self pursues achievement as a way to manufacture the value we so desire. Other times pursuing perfection is the path to avoiding negative comments. For others, becoming the life of the party protects our wounds.

You get the idea — the false self is quick to take in the nuances of the human world and begins to push us to be what is valued rather than our true selves.

The value system of the false self is that your value comes from what you do.

You may have figured out that another name for the false self is the inner critic.

At some point, the false self who started as an ally becomes a bully. It is the false self who will use any trick to keep us on the path of success or perfection or fun. The false self is not above lying to us about our worth and even God’s love for us.

We can feel like a prisoner who has lost its sense of freedom. The unrelenting inner critic is a tough task master and can drown out all other voices.

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And yet there is a very important other voice.

It is the voice of divine love that comes in perfect love to us just the way we are.

We often talk about love as a feeling.

Another way of understanding love is that it signals what we value.

Our love of something or someone gives that thing worth or esteem.

If you are a Red Socks fan — you love and value them.

If dark chocolate is one of your food groups — like me — you love it and cannot imagine the world without it.

In the passage from John’s letter, we are told that God loved us first. God created us in love. God values us.

God cannot imagine the world without us. God is our best fan.

Our true self knows this. But our true self is usually drowned out by the biting, grumbling voice of the false self.

Jesus is all too aware of the power of the false self and of the world in trying to tell us our value.

I believe that is why Jesus incorporates our selves in the commandments..

It is imperative as followers of Jesus that we can trust and rest in the love God has for us.

It is only God’s healing love that can tend our initial wounds and dismantle the false self and make us whole to love ourselves and others.

The way of love is that we turn toward God when we make mistakes because we know we are loved in spite of ourselves and forgiveness is literally ours for the asking.

The way of the false self is that when we make mistakes, we feel shame and we are told that it is further proof that we are not lovable and so we turn away from God.

The false self means well but it prefers to be in charge.

The true self understand that we are never really in charge but we are always held in God’s love and that is the place that we were always meant to be — not kept from it because of shame or fear or regret.

May we tune our ears to God and invite the healing we need. Amen.