

In small group, we have been reading and discussing a book titled, "Delighting in the Trinity" by Michael Reeves. Much of the content of the book centers on the idea that our triune God has always been and will continue loving within the Godhead for all eternity. He argues that because it has always been in the very nature of God to pour forth love among the Trinity, it was only natural for him to create mankind to be the recipient of his love and made to be a participant in the loving relationship within the Godhead. And so he did just that, creating Adam & Eve and placing them in the Garden of Eden where they walked with God in perfect loving unity. The relationship was so pure and perfect that Adam and Eve could walk with God in their nakedness, both unafraid and unashamed.

Everything changed when Adam and Eve sinned by taking and eating from the tree of good and evil. Interestingly, Reeves argues that the resulting catastrophic rift between God and man was not because Adam and Eve failed to love, but because their outward love toward God turned inward. They pursued their own pleasure, what seemed good to their eyes. The fall was the result of misguided love, turning from loving God and toward self.

The Brain & Behavior Research Foundation defines self-love as, "a state of appreciation for oneself that grows from actions that support our physical, psychological and spiritual growth. Self-love means having a high regard for your own well-being and happiness. Self-love means taking care of your own needs and not sacrificing your well-being to please others...". It has been striking to me how much this concept has been cultivated in American culture. Self-love has clearly taken center stage. In a recent online article from Good Housekeeping, Karla Pope went as far as saying, "Self-love is the purest and most important form of love...". How far we have fallen!

It is no wonder that we see discord and disunity growing among Americans and even within the church. If loving ourselves is the most important form of love, how can we possibly ever truly love one another?

That is what makes weekends like this last one so special. Our Good Friday service brought a different type of love into focus, the self-sacrificing love of Jesus. Through song, we pondered the love of Christ toward sinners through the imagery of fountain and stream. We were called to use our imagination to envision, "the stream (of blood) Thy flowing wounds supply" conjoined with the "redeeming love" of God, as sinners, "plunged beneath that flood lose all their guilty stains." – a fountain pouring forth selfless love.

Rich's preaching from Galatians 2:20 further spoke of the SUPER love of the Son of God, who, "**loved me and gave himself for me.**" (my emphasis). Steadily we were called to remember the deeply outward loving God, a Father who sends the Son to love outwardly and give sacrificially.

At the Passover meal, the night before his astounding sacrifice, he commanded his disciples to love one another as he had loved them. Immediately thereafter, he said these very recognizable words, "**Greater love has no one than this, that someone lays down his life for his friends.**" (Jn 15:12-13). In the two verses that follow, he called them friends. Later that evening, he would be betrayed by Judas, and abandoned by the rest. In a matter of hours, Peter, the man who during the Passover meal said to Jesus, "**I will lay down my life for you,**" (Jn 13:37) would deny three times that he had any association with him. And so, the Messiah went on to face the cross alone...where he would lay down his life for his friends.

Consider the outcome at the hand of a self-centered God. Had Jesus turned his love inward and humanly speaking sought his own well-being and happiness, there would be no cross. Had Jesus taken care of his own needs and avoided sacrifice for the sake of others, there would be no redemption. Had our Savior pursued a course of “pure” self-love, our guilty stains would remain. But thanks be to God that his blood flowed outward toward us! **“By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us...”** (1 John 3:16a)

And if that were not enough, this sacrifice has made the way for us to once again become one with the Father, even as the Son is one with the Father. And as we love others as Christ loved us, the world will know of the love of God as manifested through the Son (Jn 17:20-26). Love overflowing.

I am confident that we will continue to be bombarded with the notion that we should love ourselves above all else. We will be told that we can never love another until we first love ourselves. Perhaps we have even been listening to the calls. If so, Thomas Chalmers, a well-known 19th century clergyman from Scotland would warn us that no one can, “dispossess the heart of an old affection, but by the expulsive power of a new one.” So I would encourage you to set aside time over the days and weeks ahead to reflect upon the sacrificial love of Jesus. Let the love that he poured out for you penetrate deeply into your heart. Dwell with him. Abide in his love. Plunge into the stream and wade around in it. And as you do, God promises to make you more like his Son, you in him and him in you. He has rescued you from constant self-love, having filled you with the Holy Spirit who perfectly loves God and others. This abounding love has the power to dispossess you of the perversion of love turned inward.

You have actually been granted access to walk with him once more, just as Adam and Eve did in the early days of the Garden. Can you believe it?!?! There is only one catch. You can't do it by *yourself*!

Pastor Brad