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Jesus said, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets." For those of you old enough like myself to remember the 1928 Prayer Book are very familiar with Jesus' words because they were said at the beginning of every time the Eucharist was celebrated. The rabbis were forever summarizing the heart of religion because there were so many religious laws. There were 613 commandments. 365 were commandments against doing something and 248 required you to do something. Can you imagine trying to keep them all straight?

We so associate the summary of the law with Jesus that you may be surprised to know it was not unique to Jesus. He was actually quoting two verses from the Jewish scriptures. First from Deuteronomy: " You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might." The second is from Leviticus: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

In today's homily I want to drill down into the last part of the summary of the law: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. Love comes in many forms. What kind of love are we talking about? The Greeks had three words for love. The first, eros, stood for sexual love. We derive the word erotic from it. Filia, the second word for love, stood for love of family; for example, the love a mother has for her child. The third definition relates to the love of humankind. It is best translated by the word compassion. This third kind of love is the love Jesus refers to when he tells us to love our neighbors as ourselves. It is the kind of love the Good Samaritan showed when he bound up the wounds of the man who had been set upon by robbers on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho. The Good Samaritan's love was a compassionate love, not an erotic love or a familial love. So we are too are to have compassion on our neighbors as we have compassion, or love, for ourselves.

It follows, then, that we must first love ourselves before we can love others. We must feel compassionate towards ourselves before we can truly be compassionate to others. One must proceed the other to be effective. The second important point is to not confuse love of self with selfishness. In our individualistic society there is always a temptation to fall into this trap. In the 1980's a best seller was written with the title, "Looking out for Number One." I actually read the book. Basically it was about how to become top dog in a dog eat dog world. People were seen as objects to be manipulated for your own ends. In the 1980's this was symbolized by

the phrase “Greed is good.” In the early years of this century it was personified by Ken Lay and the Enron collapse. Today of course all we need do is read the paper to see what greed has done to our economy. In the booms that come before busts in our capitalistic society there always seems to be a burst of selfishness and greed that leads to the undoing of those who pursue these goals.

To be clear, Jesus is in no way calling us to selfishness. Rather, it is excepting in the depths of our souls that God loves us with great compassion, and just as important, that we are worthy of this love. How can we be compassionate toward others when we feel little love for ourselves? Unfortunately there is much in our society and even in the church that tears down rather than build up. It makes it hard for us to truly love ourselves. In Christ we are all made worthy to stand before him as ones forgiven, healed and renewed. However, you wouldn’t know that from the old prayer book we replace in the 1970’s. Many of us grew up repeating Sunday after Sunday that we were “miserable offenders,” and that “there was no health in us.” We were told we not worthy even to gather up the crumbs under God’s table. Things have certainly gotten better in the church. We have a new prayer book and a lot has changed since 1990 in this diocese. It was in that year when I learned of a female priest, visiting a church one Sunday, was told by a female parishioner that she was, “An abomination before the Lord” for simply being a female priest.

Yes, there are things that are unlovable about us. We are not perfect. We miss the mark. But we are human, and it is easy to become discouraged by faults and failures. And if we don’t like ourselves, don’t have compassion on ourselves, it is harder to reach out in love and compassion to others as Jesus calls us to do. I like to define sin as everything that is unlovable in us. Thank goodness God has not left us trapped in this state of affairs. Jesus came to save us from this kind of sinfulness. Our brokenness is made whole in Christ. St. John tells us, “Indeed, God did not send his son into the world to condemn the world, but that in order that that the world might be saved through him.” Goodness and wholeness triumphs over the evil in us. St John again: “We love him because he first loved us.” As a former Presiding Bishop of our church put it: “We don’t have to be perfect to be good Christians.”

There is an Episcopal monk who used to be a teacher that tells the following parable. There once was a young child who make a picture as a gift to his teacher. The child very patiently painted a picture of his house with his family standing outside in front of the house. After it was completed the child brought it up to his teacher as a gift. When the teacher looked at it he didn’t say to the child, “What an awful picture you made! Why did you paint the sky green and the grass blue?”

Don't you know it's the other way around. Your house is so crude and your family are just stick figures. At your age you should be doing a much better job at this kind of thing." No, the teacher does not say these things. He says: "Thank you, thank you so much for painting this picture for me and giving it to me as a gift. It's a wonderful picture! Thank you so much for thinking of me and giving me this beautiful gift." This is what God is like. He accepts what we have to offer with gratitude, not criticism. Although it is hard to accept sometimes, God loves unconditionally in spite of our faults and our failures; or sin, if you will.

If God loves us unconditionally and accepts what we do for God with gratitude, as imperfect as it may seem to us, then we can love ourselves. We can have compassion for ourselves even though we fall short of the mark. Even though we fail to be the best that we can be. It is certainly true that we can feel unworthy when we see the needs of the world all around us. It is easy to say, "I don't have what it takes. God is asking too much!" We have famous company from the Bible who felt the same way. When Moses was called by God at the burning bush Moses claimed to be a poor public speaker. No way could he stand up and confront Pharaoh. Samuel was called to be a prophet by God at a young age and responded that he was only a boy. Imperfect as these two great leaders were, they were empowered by God to do what God called them to do. Moses became the leader of the Hebrews and led them out of slavery in Egypt to the promised land. Samuel became a great prophet of God. We feel unworthy but in Christ we are able to overcome everything that hold us back from doing what God calls us to do. By loving ourselves, by forgiving ourselves, we can then go out and live out what it means to love our neighbor.