

Prayer

God to us like mother or father,

Cosmic in love,

Constant in concern,

Abundant in giving,

Tender in attentiveness,

We worship you.

God to us in Christ,

Love embodied,

Concern in flesh,

Tender in touch,

Fully human,

We worship you.

God to us as Spirit,

Creating relentlessly,

Flowing through every created being

Blowing from the four winds

Breathing in us in unending rhythm,

Filling Jesus,

We worship you.

Where love has been devalued, forgotten or diminished, forgive us.

When we have resisted love, restrained love, confined love, not given love enough room or space or time, forgive us.

Where we have ignored love because of how it came to us, in whom it came to us, by which it has come to us, forgive us.

Where love has been abused or slighted or taken for granted, forgive us.

Love us again, we pray dear God, until we love you, and love our neighbour, and ourselves in Christ through whom we pray.

Amen.

“Loving God and Neighbour” a sermon based on Matthew 22:34-46, preached at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand by Kerry Enright on 29 October 2017.

Once or twice I have not taken enough care of woollens in the washing machine and dryer, to find they have emerged ... diminished. I could not stretch them enough to wear again.

When Owen Baragwanath was Moderator of the General Assembly, he visited Turakina Maori Girls College in Marton. After the formal welcome, one of the students at Turakina came forward and held out a gift, a patterned belt. She looked at the belt, and looked at the girth of the Moderator, 6 foot four, 140 kilograms, and is reputed to have said: “I wonder if the Moderator has a smaller brother.”

Not just clothes shrink - words shrink - words no longer big enough to carry their meaning. There are few sadder things in life than shrunk words. The word *Great* until a President got hold of it. The word *Awesome* until a generation got hold of it.

In a world with the television programme “Married at first sight”, one of those words is love.

The word love has been shrunk so small, it doesn't seem big enough to speak of our relationship with God. It's too casual, too common, too erratic. We hold out the word; we look to God: does God have a smaller brother?

Yes – brothers and sisters called “idols”. An idol is a god shrunk to fit small souls- a tamed and convenient god, a pocket sized pliable god. Shrunk gods lead to shrunk love.

We need to let God wear this word, stretch the word, fill the word, so it expands, and becomes big enough for us to use, big enough to be true of God, big enough to call forth enough from us.

That is what the people of Israel and the people of Jesus learned over time.

There are 613 commandments in the First Testament, the Hebrew scriptures. And the lawyer, perhaps a detailed person, knowing there are 613, asks the trick question – Which of these is greatest?

And Jesus uses the word “love”, a big word. Only this word is big enough to describe our relationship with God.

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.” “You shall love your neighbour as yourself.”

The Lord your God.

This isn't a distant abstract God who set the universe in motion and then took a break. This is the God whose name was so holy they couldn't say it out loud, whose face was so wondrous they couldn't look upon it, whose heart was so passionate they wrote book after book about God's faithfulness in the face of Israel's faltering response, so passionate Hosea compares it to the love of bride and groom, so committed it elicits love in response.

And this God is your God.

Your God is the God who shaped God's whole life to be in relationship with us, not just in the good times but also when our life is shocking and embarrassing and humiliating and sad. Jesus doesn't talk about God; he talks about the Lord your God.

And that brings us to the word neighbour.

When Jesus is asked the famous question, “Who is my neighbour?” we’re not sure if neighbour means the regular people we encounter nearly every day or people who are poor or people who are our enemy or the whole wide world.

Which of those we choose can turn love into something shrunken and narrow, love of people like us, or can turn love into something vague and overactive and inclined to burn us out.

And the third segment - self.

We need the words God and neighbour so the idea of self does not shrink. Modernity is determined to shrink this word, to create a freestanding self that doesn’t need God or neighbour.

How’s that project going? Despite bookshops crammed with self-help manuals, limitless advice on what diet and activities will benefit us, and a reduction in the diseases that used to keep earlier generations busy, we don’t seem to be happier.

For Christians, God and neighbour and self are revealed in the figure of Jesus.

Jesus shows us what God looks like, the Lord God, whose life is shaped to be with us, the Lord our God, who’s as close to us as a mother to her baby.

And Jesus shows us what our neighbour looks like.

The Good Samaritan parable comes alive when we realise it is Jesus who was beaten and bruised and left to die. That’s what the cross did – it left Jesus dying by the side of the road, it made Jesus our neighbour. And it is we who walk past on the other side, then and now.

When Jesus says, whatever you did for the hungry, the naked, the prisoner, you did for me, he is showing us himself in our neighbour.

When Jesus says “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind... And you shall love your neighbour as yourself,” he is the Lord our God, and he is our neighbour.

And so there’s only one place to learn what is “self” and how to love “self” - and that’s face to face with Jesus. Face to face with him we are not what we have. We are not our wallet. We are not our house. We are not our work. We are not even our family.

We are what Jesus thinks of us, because Jesus is God, and Jesus is our neighbour. Our self is who we are before Jesus.

Jesus is hurt by thoughtless things we never knew we’d done, and delighted by unconscious gestures we never realised we made. He understands the fear that makes us cruel and the joy

that makes us generous. He rejoices in the very thrill of our existence, is tender and close to us when we are curved in on our self, rejoices in the moment of our turning to him, exalts as we spread our wings to fly in his Spirit.

Jesus is the heart within our heart. He adores us, winning us to love, overcoming our selfishness.

Selfishness says, “No one’s looking out for me, so I’d better take as much as I can while I can so I have plenty for when things turn bad.” Selfishness isn’t a sign of too much self-love: it’s the opposite. It’s a sign of profound insecurity.

Sometimes Christianity can shrink “self”, when we are told that we should always put others before our self or risk being called selfish. Sam Wells of St Martin’s in the Field offers a word of advice:

“When you hear the words “Love your neighbour as yourself,” swap the words round and say, “Love yourself as your neighbour.”

We’re able to love others because we stand face to face with Jesus, the Lord your God, your neighbour, and before whom you are your self.

This is the work of love: to let our self be loved by Jesus, and to be so energized and transformed by that love, that we love our self among all the countless neighbours God calls us to love.

They are all big words and they need each other – God, neighbour, self, love – to be big enough.

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