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That me—God’s beloved

by *Kristen Kuempel*

I am going to be straight-up honest here: I am the absolute worst person to be asked to write an article on loving yourself.


Instead of writing them, I should just paper my house with articles written by others in the hopes that I would absorb some of their wisdom through osmosis. Unfortunately, not only do I not know how to love myself, but I am also afflicted with pride—so when I was asked if I would write this, I wouldn’t allow myself to say, “No.” Because then, when I stared at the blank screen of my laptop for hours and days trying to come up with something to write, I could be critical of myself for saying yes in the first place. “You thought you could write this article?! Are you nuts?! What could you possibly have to offer a reader?! You’ve met you, right?!” The paradoxical way my pride and my self-doubt tag team is pretty impressive if you think about it.

Yikes.

So here I sit. Feeling a great deal of responsibility to you, dear reader, to provide some sort of clarity around the concept of loving yourself. The mug sitting beside me has held hot coffee that turned into cold coffee, hot tea that turned into iced tea. I’m giving serious consideration to retiring the mug in favor of a wine glass, and still, I have no pearls of wisdom to give you.

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Except this: I don't think that self-love is possible. Not in any real way. Loving yourself (or the inability to do so) seems like something we've invented rather recently. I'm fairly confident that previous generations didn't worry about loving themselves. They didn't have the free time for crippling bouts of existential dread that their descendants would enjoy—they were too busy trying not to die of cholera.

If I had gone to my beloved grandmother who died at the age of 97 and confessed, "Gram. I don't know how to love myself," she would have looked at me like I had lost my blessed mind, then sent me outside to pick worms off her tomatoes. Gram was a firm believer in the restorative power of picking worms off her tomatoes. The truth is that whether previous generations worried about loving themselves or not, there is a deep sense in our current culture that we are missing some sense of being beloved. Of belonging. Of being missed. Of being accepted. Of being wanted.

We cling to social media, substituting likes and retweets in the place of honest connection that leads to feelings of belonging and worth. As we look for connection and validation in an app, the only face we see is our own, reflected in the screen. No wonder we feel disconnected from ourselves and others.

In early January, the church remembers the Baptism of Jesus. Often just a week or two after Christmas, we hear the story of a dove flinging itself from heaven toward a wet and dripping Jesus while God, who sounds suspiciously like James Earl Jones in my mind, proclaims, "This is my son, the Beloved. With him, I am well pleased!"

I sat in our church, looking at my two children sitting next to me, wondering if they felt like they were pleasing to me. One was staring out the window. One was texting a friend across the sanctuary. Neither was paying attention to what was going on in the church service. As a pastor and a bishop, that should have bothered me.

Instead, I gloried in the way my youngest child's cowlick defied any and all attempts at being subdued—and always had. I admired the way the long and elegant fingers of my eldest child danced across the touchscreen until she caught my eye and guiltily tucked her phone under her thigh.

When we stood to sing, I marveled at how tall they both were and remembered with gratitude the days when they fit into my arms. There was literally nothing about them that moved me to offer anything but a deep and heartfelt thanks to God for trusting me with them. They are far from always well-behaved, and they are teenagers, so . . . you know. There's some degree of grossness in our daily lives, but there is never a time I don't delight in them, rejoice that they exist, and give thanks that they are mine.

In baptism, we are reborn children of God. In the baptismal liturgy we are marked with a cross and told, "Child of God, you have been sealed with the Holy Spirit, and marked with the cross of Christ forever". In essence, what is happening in our baptism is the same thing that happened at

the baptism of Jesus (minus the dive-bombing dove. . . probably). God speaks out over the chaos and tumult of life to announce to the universe, “This is my child, my beloved. With them I am well-pleased!”

Wow.

God loves me. Not even Instagram me, but the real me. The me that makes mistakes, messes up, hides her insecurities with humor and sarcasm, eats too much ice cream and doesn’t exercise nearly enough. Not the selfie me, where I manage to get the angle just right so that my double chin can be erased if I kick up the brightness level and use the right filter.

The real me. With chin hairs and stretch marks and a tendency to pick my cuticles. Not just the publicly poised and confident me, but the me that charges in where angels fear to tread and speaks my mind so emphatically that I frequently end up putting my foot in my mouth. The me who only cleans the bathroom when company is coming over. The me who doesn’t change her sheets nearly as often as she apparently should. The me who doesn’t regularly make sure that her children are brushing AND flossing. The me who often falls asleep without kissing her husband goodnight. The me who drives entirely too long with the “check engine” light flashing. The me who forgets to pay bills. The me who finds entirely too much joy in dropping f-bombs, or skipping church, or binge-watching reality television, or any of the millions of other reasons I have for finding myself unlovable—that me is God’s Beloved. That me is me that pleases God.

Paul wrote, “Consider your own call: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth” (1 Corinthians 1:26). Or as Eugene Peterson translates the verse in *The Message*, “Take a good look, friends, at who you were when you got called into this life. I don’t see many of the ‘brightest and best’ among you, not many influencers, not many from high-society families.”

It makes no sense to me. I have filed this state of being beloved under the heading “Mysteries of Faith”—which means that I have found some way to accept this reality, even though I have absolutely no ability to explain it. It just is. Like the love of my Gram and her therapeutic tomato worms, this belovedness has become foundational to my life, and I find it a far firmer foundation than me loving myself. I mean—I’m a mess! Have you met me? My love is nothing to build a life on. But the love of God? That’s something that will stand the test of time.





Discussion questions:

1. Is the truth that you are God's Beloved easy or difficult for you to accept? Why?
2. Scripture tells us that "we love because God first loved us". How do loving others connect you to the love of God?
3. Do loving others make it easier to believe you are also loved by God?

Closing prayer:

God of all, I am an unholy mess. And yet, you have made me your child through baptism, named me your Beloved and take pleasure in my life. I do not understand how or why you would do this, so help me trust in your love that holds me all my days. Teach me to see myself through your eyes and guide me to see those around us as your beloved children. Amen.



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Faith reflections: The labor of love

by Meghan Johnston Aelabouni

Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he said, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" He said to him, "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" He answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself." And he said to him, "You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live."
(Luke 10:25-28.)

"I love you, Ethan," said my four-year-old daughter Natalie to her seven-year-old brother one day. He rolled his eyes with a sigh worthy of a teenager.

Undaunted, Natalie tried again: "Ethan, I love you! I love you, Ethan!" Silence.

Then came the sound of my sweet girl screaming like a heavy metal singer: "Ethan! I love you!!!" Still no response; so Natalie brought out the heavy artillery: "Mo-om! Ethan won't say it back!"

A predictable discussion ensued:

"Ethan, tell your sister you love her."

"But Mom, I don't love her. She's annoying."

"Ethan, tell your sister you love her or you'll lose your iPad time."


"Fine," Ethan huffed. In his flattest voice, he muttered, "Natalielloveyou."

"Well," his sister smirked, "I don't love you."

No one got iPad time.

Loving in myriad ways





Love. According to the Bible—and the Beatles—it’s all you need. Love God, love others, love yourself. (And don’t forget to love your enemies.) “Do this,” Jesus says, “and you will live.” Clear advice. Sensible. And hopeless! I mean, seriously, Jesus, have you ever met us?

Each of my kids suspects that their sibling was put on earth for the express purpose of aggravating them. When I tell them that loving each other is mandatory, they look at me aghast, as though I have commanded them to ride their scooters to the moon or to eat (shudder) vegetables.

As we age, we learn to love in myriad ways. Yet even as wise and mature adults, we may find it difficult to love some of the people in our lives.

Jesus’ commandment can seem impossible. How do we love the bully or the betrayer? How do we love the person who has broken our child’s heart or our own? How do we love the presidential candidate we can’t stand—and the relatives and friends who proudly endorse that candidate?

“Love is a verb”

But wanting to justify himself, [the lawyer] asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” Jesus replied, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers. . .”
–Luke 10:29

Who is the neighbor we must love, and how do we love them? Jesus answers with the parable of the Good Samaritan, a story about an outsider who sees someone in distress and stops to help. One of my seminary professors summed up the parable this way: “Love is a verb.” In other words, no one is beyond the ties of neighbor—and to love a neighbor is to actively work for their wellbeing.

For those we struggle to love, this definition may sound daunting. But Jesus’ parable is not about two adversaries finding common ground. As far as we can tell, the Samaritan and the man he helps have never met before. They do not speak or exchange names. (Likely, this is because one of them is unconscious.) Jesus’ example, this epitome of neighborly love, is between strangers.

If love is a verb, then maybe the love God asks of us is more action than emotion. We don’t necessarily have to feel a warm rush of affection for someone in order to love them. As Bonnie Raitt famously sang, “You can’t make the heart feel something it won’t.” We are, however, asked to pray and to work for others’ wholeness—and as we do so, we may find ourselves changed as well. Maybe this is why we are to love our neighbors as ourselves: as we love others, love finds us too.

And if loving engagement in some relationships is not healthy or possible, there is still an option available to us: prayer.

Love and the Lord's Prayer

[Jesus] was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples." He said to them, "When you pray, say: Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread. And forgive [us our sins,] for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us. And do not bring us to the time of trial."

–Luke 11:1-4

In Luke, Jesus' teaching about prayer follows close on the heels of his words about love. As the church shares the Lord's Prayer, the true gift of this prayer might be the plural "us." Each time we say, "Our Father," we are reminded that we are all connected—all of us saints and sinners, flawed and yet beautiful, made in God's image. We may not all love each other, but we are all beloved of God.

As we pray "give us . . . forgive us," we pray with family and friends, enemies and strangers. We pray together with people who have shown us kindness and cruelty, people whose hearts contain the same good and evil as our own hearts.

Those we cannot bring ourselves to love are still part of "us" in the Lord's Prayer. We pray for their daily bread, too, that they might be forgiven, too—even that we might be the ones to forgive them! We pray that they, too, might be saved from times of trial, and that all of us might be delivered from evil—including the evil that divides us. As we pray in this way, we love our neighbor as ourselves, and even love our enemy. And "faith, hope and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love."

Discussion questions:

1. What lessons have you learned about how to love others? How did you learn them?
2. Which is easier, or more difficult—loving a stranger, or loving an enemy you know well?
3. What might happen if you committed to praying for the wellbeing of someone you find it difficult to love?



Closing prayer (The Lord's Prayer):

Our Father in heaven, holy be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread, and forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us. Save us from the time of trial, and deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours, now and forever. Amen.

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