

*Alive in Love*

Psalm 23, I John 3:16-24

Whitefish UMC

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- † The headline caught my attention right away: **Generation Me: a new book says we're in a narcissism epidemic....** Authors Jean Twenge and W. Keith Campbell have written a book that says that in building up the confidence of our kids, we've created a generation of hot-house flowers.
- † These children are so puffed up with a disproportionate sense of self-worth (the definition of narcissism) that they don't have the resiliency skills they need when Mommy and Daddy can't fix something. So says Raina Kelley in last week's *Newsweek*.
- † She goes on to mention six-figure sweet sixteen parties and cosmetic plastic surgery for graduation presents as examples of over-the-top efforts to develop our children's self esteem. Of course these are extreme examples, but when the authors addressed students at Southern Connecticut State University a couple of weeks ago, they found evidence even in the audience of ordinary college kids.
- † Thirty percent of college students agree with the statement: "If I show up for every class, I deserve at least a B." When faced with the question—do you agree with this research, that you guys are the most narcissistic generation ever—there were uniform head nods and knowing grins.
- † "At the end of the day I love me and I don't think that's wrong," says Sharisee Tucker, a 21-year-old senior, a self-professed narcissist. "I

- don't think it's a problem, having most people love themselves. I love me.”
- † But why should we care that narcissism is on the rise? Won't real life straighten these self-centered folks out when tragedy strikes or the world turns against them? Not necessarily. Our culture used to keep hubris in check. Not so much so anymore.
  - † As the *Newsweek* writer reviewing this new book says, “Now we encourage this sense of entitlement. Pastors preach a Jesus that wants us to be rich. The famously egocentric wide receiver Terrell Owens declares at a press conference that being labeled selfish is fine with him.
  - † Donald Trump names everything he owns after himself and calls his detractors ‘losers.’ We live in a world where anyone can be a star—if only on YouTube. The general sense among students is that with the world being such a competitive, cutthroat place, they have to be narcissists.”
  - † But let's pause here and evaluate that last statement. Does competition indeed require us to put ourselves first? And what did Jesus have to say about that?
  - † First, we know that Jesus did say that we are meant to love God, with all our hearts, souls, minds, and strength, and that we are to love our neighbor as ourselves. That's the great commandment, the overarching message of Jesus Christ, isn't it?
  - † So yes, self-love is necessary, but as someone once said, we each ought to love ourselves no more or no less than God loves every being. So let's take a look again at the scripture passage that Donnalee just read. It is attributed to John the Elder, a church leader living in an

ancient seaport city in Asia Minor. There are three letters in the New Testament that bear John the Elder's name.

- † Even though these letters are tucked near the end of the New Testament, their importance is secured. For it is to John that one of the most frequently quoted declarations about God is attributed. It's a sentence that our children learn without fail: "God is love."
- † It seems almost trite to say it. "Of course God is love." Everybody knows that, right? But it wasn't so when John the Elder wrote his letter. In those days the nature of the love of God threatened to tear apart the new church of Jesus Christ. But how could this be?
- † On one side of the argument were those who maintained that God is love but that God's love is of an ethereal nature and that God would never send a son who would become involved in the human condition, tainted by earth and flesh and death. For them, the savior sent by God was a heavenly, spiritual Christ.
- † On the other side stood John the Elder. He was convinced that God's love was not merely an abstraction but was personal and embodied in God's son Jesus Christ, who was truly human, who experienced the sufferings, the longings, the joys of actual human existence.
- † "How can we know that God is love?" asked John the Elder. "We know love by this, that Jesus laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another."
- † Wait a minute. That's a pretty fierce demand on us followers of Jesus, isn't it? It's not only that God's love is sacrificial, self-giving—but that our love ought to be like God's love. So if God sends only a spiritual son, then there is no need for those who follow to do much of anything except think eternal and ethereal thoughts, attend

church, and participate in intellectual discussions about the nature of God.

- † But if God became deeply involved in solidarity with human existence, then we who are baptized in his name have no choice but to do the same. God is love, but God also *does love*, and so should we.
- † Now we can begin to understand why John the Elder was so controversial. He wouldn't let people get away with simply thinking deep thoughts about Christ. "Little children," he said, indicating the immaturity of those to whom he wrote's faith, "let us love not in word or speech, but in truth and action."
- † What does that kind of love look like? You might have seen it as Mike Henson and Jenny, along with Mike's parents who came up from Texas just for this, traded his radiology lab for the weedy back forty of our property to prepare for the community garden. Mike, you have a future as a heavy equipment operator.
- † You might have seen it in the forgiveness offered to someone who really doesn't deserve it. You might have seen it in the acts of care and compassion of medical personnel caring for victims of the H1N1 virus, despite the risk to themselves.
- † There's a common thread that runs through God's love alive in us, and we alive in love. Karl Barth said that there is no such thing as an individual Christian. In the passages of the gospel for today in which Jesus is described as the good shepherd, there is no such thing as an individual sheep.
- † As Cynthia Lindner wrote, "In our essential belongingness, our being is bound up with the entire flock: with believers who break bread and recite prayers with us, and with those sheep whom Jesus knows and

God sees, but whom we can barely bring ourselves to acknowledge and welcome, let alone live alongside or die to protect.”

- † How does this mutual belonging fare in these days of swine flu and the accompanying fear of Mexicans that occurred with as much virulence as the flu itself?
- † Only time will tell. But God commands us to act in love, maybe because it is pretty clear that we tend toward self-absorption. We have a tendency, says Barbara Brown Taylor in her new book, to be at the center of our awareness and to forget that other people are at the center of their own awareness, at the center of their own story, too.
- † Instead we think of them as on the fringes of our stories. But that is not how God means for us to be, to love. The scripture today makes the glad promise that when we are brave and bold to live in love, we enter into the very presence of God. “When you obey God’s commandments to love,” God abides in you, and you abide in God.
- † So which will it be for you? A life that stars you and you alone? Or a life lived as Jesus did, in love for others? Reality lies somewhere in between doesn’t it? For the world can be competitive, and sometimes we seem to be our only advocate. But in our best moments, when we continue Easter by loving as God loves, a new life emerges.
- † John the Elder lays it out there for us: wager everything in life on the power of love. So what if conventional wisdom says just the opposite? Love is the foundation of the universe. It was in the beginning is now and ever shall be.
- † Love is the one eternal force that will never end. When we act in love, through simple acts of kindness and service and forgiveness, we, too, are alive in love—just as Jesus was to his disciples during that

first Easter. We are nothing less than living Easters—the revelation of the very nature of God in our time.

† You've heard these next words before, written by the psychiatrist Dr. Karl Menninger some years ago:

† People are unreasonable, illogical, and self-centered.

Love them anyway.

If you do good, people will accuse you of selfish, ulterior motives.

Do good anyway.

If you are successful, you will win false friends and true enemies.

Succeed anyway.

The good you do today will be forgotten tomorrow.

Do good anyway.

Honesty and frankness make you vulnerable.

Be honest and frank anyway.

People favor underdogs but follow only top dogs.

Fight for some underdogs anyway.

What you spend years building may be destroyed overnight.

Build anyway.

People really need help but may attack you if you help them.

Help people anyway.

Give the world the best you've got and you'll get kicked in the teeth.

Give the world the best you've got anyway.

That is exactly what God did. Gave the world God's best, I mean.

May the power of your love work in us, O God, doing far more than we ever would ask or think, for the sake of Jesus Christ.

† For we remember....Amen.

Sources:

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Cynthia Gano Lindner, "Living by the Word," *Christian Century*, April 21, 2009.