

Welcome

Do you remember when you first learned you were a jerk?

Just me? Okay then.

It was during lunch my sophomore year of high school. I don't remember what I said, but I remember it was to two guys - Mike and Steve. Whatever I said made Steve really mad, and he was stalking away. Mike went after him, and, as they were walking out of range of my hearing, I heard Mike say, "He didn't mean it. He's a smart guy, but he doesn't always realize what he's saying."

Now, a little context: I was not cool in high school by even the most generous application of that word. I was a nerd and this was *way* before nerds were cool. Mike and Steve were both jocks, definitely part of the cool kids club. Mike and I had a couple of classes together, and we had done a couple of group projects.

Being a nerd, I knew what made me valuable to the cool kids: I was a source of good grades. Whether they were copying my homework or I got to do projects with them, the closest thing to friendship was what I traded for brains.

I didn't believe I was essentially likeable, that anyone would want to be my friend just because I was me. I had to give them something - brains.

What I *couldn't* see until I somehow inadvertently offended Steve was that I was using my nerd powers to hurt people. I was shocked Steve was hurt by something I said. I didn't think I *mattered* enough to kids like Steve to hurt them even on purpose.

That moment was a big revelation to me: the very thing I thought made me likeable to my classmates was also hurting them. I had become the worst kind of nerd.

My insecurity had turned me into a jerk.

In high school, I barely had the emotional intelligence to have that self-realization. Much less did I have the insight to realize that *everyone else had the same struggle as me*. Everyone was insecure (that was true in high school and it's still true today).

And our insecurity makes us jerks.

Today, we're going to talk about insecurity - our inability to receive love, to believe we're worthy of love. Because this is the root of our toxic relationship habits (whatever they might be).

Today is about how to learn to receive God's love and what happens when we we do. When we learn to be loved, we are transformed into a people who offers the world around us an infinite source of love. We learn to love by learning to be loved.

Message

In this season after Easter, we're working through the "I Am" statements Jesus made in the Gospel of John. "I Am" is a translation of Yahweh, the name of God. Throughout John's Gospel, Jesus makes it clear he's God by calling himself "I Am". But he also makes statements like "I am the Way" or "I am the resurrection" to reveal what it means that he is God.

Our series is called "Monday Messiah" because what Jesus reveals to us about his godhood. Jesus came not just for our religious experiences - our Sunday mornings. He came for our everyday lives. That's why he uses images like sheep, vines and bread - though they're strange to us, they were part of the everyday lives of Israel. So we're asking how Jesus matters in our everyday lives. What difference does Jesus make on *Monday*?

[Scripture Slide] Last week, Tommy explored John 15, where Jesus claimed, "I am the true vine." He invited us to 'abide' with him, to stay connected to him. So in light of that invitation, we're going to stay in this 'I Am' statement one more week.

Today, I want to ask the question, "How do we ABIDE?" How do we stay connected to Jesus the living vine? How do we stay in God's love? Let's read Jesus' further words to his disciples, beginning in verse 9:

"I have loved you even as the Father has loved me. Remain in my love. When you obey my commandments, you remain in my love, just as I obey my Father's commandments and remain in his love. I have told you these things so that you will be filled with my joy. Yes, your joy will overflow!

This is my commandment: Love each other in the same way I have loved you. There is no greater love than to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command.

I no longer call you slaves, because a master doesn't confide in his slaves. Now you are my friends, since I have told you everything the Father told me. You didn't choose me. I chose you. I appointed you to go and produce lasting fruit, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask for, using my name. This is my command: Love each other. -- John 15:9-17

Jesus first affirms that he has 'loved us even as the Father loves him.' This is important: Jesus' love for us flows from his ability to receive love from the Father. So too, he commands us to 'remain in his love' so that our joy will overflow.

Our ability to love well depends directly on whether we are receiving God's love well. We cannot love well unless we are *being* loved well.

This is a problem for many of us because we don't know how to receive love. We don't know how to be loved.

It looks different for all of us. Maybe you don't feel like you matter - deep down, you wonder why anyone would actually care about you. Or you feel like you're not *enough*, that you're one slip-up away from dropping all those spinning plates. Or that you're not even sure who the 'real you' is underneath all the activities and projects that keep you busy. Maybe you've been hurt, so the 'real you' is hidden under layer after layer of walls and facades because you're afraid of being hurt again. Maybe you manufacture crisis because you're afraid no one will care about you if you don't have something urgent that requires attention. Or you're convinced that no one actually wants *you* around.

Friends, the longer I pastor, the more I realize that our inability to love ourselves is the most significant crisis of our time.

This failure of self love is a failure of faith. We cannot believe what God says about us: that God created us in God's own image, that Jesus loves us enough to give up his own life for us.

I know that sounds selfish - that the first thing we need to focus on is self-love. After all, didn't Jesus say that the greatest love is giving one's life for one's friends? Shouldn't we be more focused on *others* than ourselves?

That certainly makes sense, but it misses the essential confession of Christianity: that we are able to do nothing apart from God. Even Jesus himself was able to love us because he received the Father's love. Tommy talked last week about how, when we don't remain connected to Jesus, we end up burning out. This is why Self Love must come first.

When we can't receive God's love, our relationships suffer. We become co-dependent, needing the affirmation of other people to feel valuable. People become a means to an end, and the goal of our relationships ends up being to give us that affirmation we're looking for elsewhere.

It's a deep, painful irony: when we don't love ourselves first, our relationships become inherently selfish. But when we love ourselves first, when we remain in God's love, connected to the true vine that is Jesus, we become free to love without stipulation, boundaries or requirement.

Remaining in Jesus' love enables us to love others well. Or, as Jesus said it, "our joy will overflow."

So the question really becomes: how do we learn to love ourselves? How do we learn to see ourselves as God does?

How do we remain in God's love?

The answer the Church has offered for the last 2,000 years has been consistent. There's no shortcut to self-love. There's no instant fix for learning to see ourselves as God does. If we want to learn to have that overflowing joy that transforms us into a self-sacrificially-loving, world-changing-fruit bearing people, we have to spend time with God.

I want to walk you through two practices that help us remain in God's love. The first is one we've covered for the last few weeks - the Sacred Reading of Scripture. The Sacred Reading is a method of reading Scripture that works to treat the Bible differently from a novel or a textbook. It's a way of slowing down, of listening for God to speak to us through the words of Scripture.

[Explanation of Lectio]

The other practice that helps us to remain in God's love is sitting meditation. Meditation works differently in different faiths - in Eastern faiths such as Hinduism or Buddhism, the goal of meditation is emptiness. Eastern religions believe the Self is an illusion and meditation helps us pierce the illusion to get to the nothingness of existence.

But Judaism and Christianity have long insisted that existence is not an illusion. Rather, the world is a good gift from a loving God. And *life*, existence, our selves - these are also good gifts from a loving God. The problem is not existence but distraction: we allow the hustle and bustle of life to disconnect us from the source of life: God. Which is why Jesus calls us to stay, stay, stay connected to the true vine, our source.

Christian meditation is a way of staying, of shutting off our distractions and just being with God. We begin with a verse or a phrase that we repeat to ourselves. We might also use a particularly meaningful image of Jesus. The point is to sit in silence with God, to stay in a spirit of prayerful reflection. Rather than trying to be empty, we're trying to clear our lives of distractions so we can be filled with God's love.

I'll warn you: these practices don't come naturally to us, especially in our distracted age. We wish there was some sort of Easy button that just connected us to God, made us perfectly loving and let us go on our way. But that's not how life works. We're not machines, as Tommy observed last week. We're creatures, animals that form habits that shape us.

This is why Christians have long called love a Virtue. A virtue is something that is innate to God's character, something God just *is*. Love is God's essential nature.

Humans like you and me can *learn* virtues. Because we are created in God's image, the longer we stay connected to God, the longer we pursue virtues, the more we *become* them. So we become more loving the more we remain connected to God's love.

The more we learn to let God love us, the easier we find it to *love like God*.

I have seen this in my own life. It's a challenge for me to believe I am worthy of love just because of who I am (and not because of what I can do for other people). Throughout my life I have struggled to engage in genuine friendship with other people - not because I don't like people, but because I'm certain deep down that they don't like *me*. My efforts to prove I'm worthy of other people's affections look like pride - I often talk too much about my own accomplishments or skills. Not because I'm actually proud of them, but because I believe that's the only reason anyone would care about me. (Of course, people can't hear my motivations, only the braggadocio).

No amount of acclaim or attention can fix that inside me. No amount of external affection can make me feel loved. That only comes when I learn to see myself as God sees me. And the more I have grown in my faith, the more I've insisted on staying connected to God, the freer I become in my relationships.

The more confident I am in God's love, the less I need to impress other people. My relationships become *more* genuine the more I stay in Jesus' love because I don't need people's approval for my self-worth. I'm free to relate to people as they are, to receive them as they are, to love them as they are (which is how God loves me).

Friends, this sort of love is transformative. (We're going to talk more about it next week.) But it can only happen when we stay in God. When we remain connected to Jesus, the true vine, the source of our life and love.

Communion + Examen

[Communion Slide] Jesus invites us to remain in his love.

Assignment + Blessing

When you remain in Jesus' love, you learn you matter because you matter to God.

When you remain in Jesus love, you find out what you do or don't produce or achieve has nothing to do with how much God loves you.

When you remain in Jesus love, you uncover the real you, the one hidden with Jesus himself, beneath all your deceptions.

When you remain in Jesus love, you find the one worthy of your trust, who gives you the courage to put yourself out there again.

When you remain in Jesus love, you find that he is always there, in good and bad times.

Go and remain in God's love. Do a sacred reading of Psalm 139.