

Sermon Discussion Information

Sermon Series: 1st, 2nd, 3rd John: Real Love Casts Out Fear

Sermon Title: "Truing Up the False Self"

Sermon Text: 1 John 2:28-3:10

Focus Statement: I want my listener to reflect on our sinful nature as being our false self and to work on transformation of our false self to our true self as Christ followers grounded in acceptance and belonging and by courageously loving God, ourselves and others.

Unique Quotes from Sermon:

"Persuasion is better than force." Timeless wisdom from the fable of an ancient pre-New Testament Greek storyteller. This wisdom is true with almost every concern of the human experience including the primary topic of today's shorter New Testament letter: personal sin. I say *personal* sin because there is such a thing as *corporate* sin or shared wrong doing of large groups of people functioning as a corporate body. But, today's Scripture, as we have heard, is about personal sin, which is a topic addressed frequently throughout the Bible and with many different philosophies and theologies as to what it is and how it may have evolved in the human experiences—as well as varied religious approaches that seek to address it structurally and personally.

The Apostle Paul wrote a long letter to the Church in First Century Rome and spoke about the personal sin of judging other people's personal sin. And, how easy it is to "show contempt for the riches of God's kindness, forbearance and patience, not realizing that God's *kindness* leads us to repentance, not some idea of God's judgement."¹ Yet, with some irony and in other letters, Paul takes a less kind and more forceful approach on even himself. Like when he wrote in his first letter to the church in Corinth saying, "I do not run like someone running aimlessly; I do not fight like a boxer beating the air. No, I strike a *blow* to my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize."²

There was one moment that Jesus used strong language regarding the personal sin of marital infidelity. On all other moral matters and in regards to personal sin in general, Jesus spoke in consistently less strident terms than what I just quoted with Paul and certainly less harshly dualistic than what John wrote in today's Scripture. The Apostle John may have not heard of Aesop's fable, but he began today's portion of his letter with very warm words: "See what great love God has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!" And then John moved quickly away from the warmth of belonging to frame personal sin as a sort of an up or down switch where those who don't sin are children of God and those who do sin, well, as he wrote "no one who lives in Christ keeps on sinning...those who keep on sinning are of the devil, in fact are *children* of the devil." But, wait a minute, everyone has and will always have the capacity for wrong doing. It's in our very nature.

Scot McKnight is an American New Testament Scholar who wrote a blog post about holiness and described his relationship with his grandmother who grew up in the holiness tradition and claimed to be entirely sanctified and that she no longer sinned.³ And, after overhearing her Grandmother using a party phone line to listen into other people's business and then pass that gossip on to another person Scott asked his grandmother:

"Grandma, do you believe in entire sanctification?"

"Yes, I do," she replied.

"Have you achieved it?"

"Yes, I have now for some years."

¹ Romans 2:4.

² 1 Corinthians 9:26-27.

³ <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2018/may-web-only/pentecost-how-spirit-sets-us-up-for-holiness.html>
(Accessed 1-26-19)

“Grandma, I just heard you gossiping, and gossiping is sin. That means you are not sinless.” Her response was priceless. “Now Scot,” she said with grandmotherly warmth and her customary twinkle in the eye, “gossiping is a mistake, not a sin, and God looks over mistakes.”

Enough said. God created us with the capacity to sin, perhaps because of the machinery of free will. So, how is what John wrote in his letter even possible? (That somehow we can be sinless?) It's *not* possible. And, if you are looking ways to address our personal sin by looking across the entire sweep of the Bible—the many voices in our holy library seem to swing widely between the poles of warmth and shame, persuasion and force such that it is easy to be confused as to what's the best approach. So, it is no surprise that Christian religion is sometimes warm and persuading and other times it overpowers and shames people into completely abstract and unrealistic understandings about sin and even more absurd—the possibility of being sinless.

And, in the churches and environments where people are consistently shamed about their wrong doing with threats and fear—it is inevitable that many in those spaces will conform to a culture of shame and fear and with great irony actually bury and never acknowledge the deeper reasons that fuel wrong doing or some habit of wrong doing in the first place.

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Let's look briefly at belonging. Transformation to our true selves is more likely when we know, that we know, that we know, *we belong*.

The True Self Knows It Belongs

Jesus consistently forgave people's sins generously, shockingly generously—sometimes whether or not people even asked to be forgiven. And, one core reason for Jesus' healings and forgiveness was to help the women and men to be re-connected to God's love for them and with their personal connection to their communities. The religious system of Jesus' origins was entangled in hundreds of holiness laws and codes. And the religious leaders and teachers that Jesus argued with couldn't understand his obscene generosity because they believed in, or at a minimum *preferred* a vision of superiority and separateness over connectedness and self-loathing as the necessary corrective action for dealing with personal sin over and above Jesus' ethic of re-connecting on the basis of grace and with the core starting point of belonging.

How do we get beyond toxic shame-based religion that continues to re-incarnate in every generation and in our religion fueling self-loathing and separateness in our lives? We begin by acknowledging that wrongdoing is actually fueled by a sense of “wrongbeing,” or a false idea of self. What is the false self? This phraseology was developed in modern times by Christian thinker and philosopher Thomas Merton⁴ and developed furthered by many other theologians and authors since the 1950s.

The teaching is grounded in what Jesus called our “old wineskin.”⁵ Jesus said that we need to “pour new wine (or new thinking and being) into new wineskin because the old wineskin will burst.”⁶ The old wineskin is our false ego that hates change and is really good at judging, splitting, labeling and locking down most things into unhelpful social contracts that were given to us by our cultural, family, and sometimes religious (or non-religious) groups, forged over time and for the purpose of barricading ourselves or our group from others for either perceived safety or desired superiority, or both.

Jesus' “new wine” and “new wineskin” was part of new agreement or new way of right being which he called “The New Covenant.” This new way was a profound turn away from the former way of doing things with its scapegoating and exclusion—was grounded in the idea of salvation coming by grace and through

⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas_Merton (accessed 1-29-19)

⁵ Mark 2:21-22.

⁶ Luke 5:33-39.

faith alone, not some abstract vision of perfection or religious meritocracy. Jesus taught that sin is punishment in itself and that holiness is ultimately about intimacy and connectedness to God and others. And that offering ourselves as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God, is to offer ourselves to the love of God, ourselves, and neighbor.

We become our true selves *while* living lives of love. This includes looking at our everyday life (trips to the grocery store, relationships at work, family conflicts, discussions about societies most difficult conflicts) where the work of connecting and loving helps us make incremental movements away from our false, separate, and boundaried self, through letting go and in some cases putting to death our false ego and unhelpful social contracts that taught us to fear.

Hands down, the most unhelpful false construct given to us either by our family systems or our religious systems is anything or anyone that says we don't belong. That we are not good enough. That we "don't make the cut." John declared the truth in today's text when he said that each of us are the children of God. We are loved. And, we belong. Do we believe this?

Three Discussion Questions:

1. What is your personal understanding about sin and who taught you that understanding?
2. How do you wrestle with the idea of "false self" "true self"?
3. What are some ways that you can engage yourself and others in regards to the journey toward our true selves with more warmth and persuasion?