

## Tough Love June 15, 2008

This is Father's Day, and when someone saw the title for today, she commented to me something along the lines of, "Yeah, sure. Mother's Day is all soft and lovely and touchy/feely, but Father's Day is all about 'tough love.'" I was pretty sure what she was talking about—the traditional image of males that they are tough, that they never cry, that they are the ones responsible for the discipline in the family, and that mothers are the loving, nurturing ones.

There may be some who, upon hearing today's title, think about a program that's come into question lately that goes by that same title. The term "tough love" in that context refers to someone treating another person harshly or sternly with the intent to help them in the long run. In most situations, the assumption is that genuine love and affection lie behind the toughness. For example, a concerned parent might refuse to give financial support to a drug-addicted child until he or she enters a drug treatment program. That would be considered practicing "tough love" in the language of that program.

To set the record straight right off the bat, I need to tell you that we're not talking about either one of those this morning. Rather, we are talking about the difficult task that most of us—mothers as well as fathers, women as well as men, old as well as young, rich as well as poor—the difficulty most of us have when it comes to loving ourselves.

I don't know about you, but I would guess that you struggle with this sometimes as I do. It seems that many of us look to others for approval; we look somewhere else to determine whether or not we're ok; we seek affirmation from someone else, indicating that we are a person of worth and value.

In the most basic of ways, we look at our compensation to see if it says we are worthy. We look to our parents, our life partners, our teachers, our coaches, our friends to let us know if we are good enough, acceptable enough, smart enough, good-looking enough. We have just

enough insecurities, and we're just enough uncertain of ourselves that we tend to look outside ourselves to see if we are OK.

I can certainly relate to that. I recall an experience early on in my ministry that illustrates what I'm trying to say. When I first became a full-time pastor at St. Luke's after being a student pastor there, I was determined to prove myself to those I saw as my "superiors"—the senior pastor, the other pastors who had been at this longer than I had, the people in the congregation with whom I related—the list went on and on.

One of my areas of responsibilities was a new one centered around family ministries, and the team with which I was working and I created a family day, brought in an outside speaker of some renown, planned the whole day, and carried it off! There were 300-400 parents and kids there, and everyone had a positive experience, as well as a fun one! It was a huge undertaking and yet we were all pleased with the way it had come off.

That happened on a Saturday, and our staff meeting day was Tuesday. Tuesday arrived, and we all gathered for the weekly meeting. I waited for someone there, hopefully the esteemed senior pastor, to compliment me and the team on our wonderful work. The staff meeting got underway, and I waited. It continued, and I waited. It ended, and nothing—not a single word was said about the event! I was crushed, so I went to the senior pastors and mentioned the event. It turned out that he didn't even know it had happened—primarily because he was definitely not a micro-manager, but mostly he didn't concern himself with our various programming areas because he trusted us to do what was right and to do the best we could in any endeavor! That was a lesson well-learned for me—that I didn't need to look elsewhere for approval, --that I didn't need to depend on approval coming from somewhere else, --that what I needed to learn was to trust myself, and go on from there. As Gabrielle Wichowski once said, **"The need to be approved by others is your own need to be approved by yourself."** That was the lesson I was in the process of learning back then.

The quote that inspired today's message actually comes from Mark Twain

who once said, **“A man cannot be comfortable without his own approval.”** As I understand it, Twain wanted us to understand that we all need to come to terms with who we are, and learn to accept and love ourselves.

That really ties with our Bible passage for this morning. It’s one we’ve used before, but often in a different context. This is Jesus who responds to a question about what he considers to be the most important commandment. The story goes like this:

One of the religious scholars came up. Hearing the lively **exchanges of question and answer and seeing how sharp Jesus was in his answers, he put in his question: “Which is most important of all the commandments?”**

**Jesus said, “The first in importance is, ‘Listen Israel: The Lord your God is one, so love the Lord God with all your passion and prayer and intelligence and energy.’ And here is the second: Love others as well as you love yourself.’ There is no other commandment that ranks with these.”**

The second commandment is the one I want us to think about. **“Love others as well as you love yourself.”** **“As well as you love yourself!”** Now I know Jesus didn’t mean this in a selfish, self-centered, narcissistic way—something we see when we’re around those who are self-indulgent in almost obscene ways. That’s not what he meant.

Rather, I think Jesus wants us to realize that the first step to being able to love others is in loving ourselves. I wonder, if Jesus were speaking in today’s jargon, if he might not phrase the “loving yourself” part of the commandment. I wonder if he wouldn’t do his best to urge us to get on with it—and not to navel-gaze and self-analyze ad nauseum, but rather to come to terms with who we are and move forward. As tough as loving and accepting ourselves is, it’s essential for our well-being, and for our capacity to share God’s love with others in this world.

Someone names Minnie Smith once said, **“I am as my Creator made me, and since God is satisfied, so am I.”** That’s a rather simple way of saying that we are God’s creation, and that God’s spirit, that spark of Godlikeness, is within each one of

us. That’s what Jesus meant, I think, when he said to us, **“The Kingdom of God is within you.”**

Each of us has that God-spark within us, and loving ourselves has to do with finding and accepting that loving goodness, that Godliness, that is a part of each of us. As Dane Rudhyar once said, **“The self can also be seen as our individual share in God.”** Carl Jung put it like this: **“The self is the God within.”**

So, OK. How do we go about accepting ourselves? Many of us have been well-trained when it comes to looking to an authoritative adult for approval and acceptance, and in fact, some of us are maybe still trying to win the approval or our parents, our superiors at work, even to the point of not being able to make our own decisions in life because we so crave the love and approval of someone “out there.” How do we turn that around?

It depends on us. We have to be willing to listen to ourselves, and to be honest with ourselves to the point of challenging those beliefs and understandings that we may have had since we were children. We need to be willing to question our intentions and motives when it comes to the decisions we trying to make. Is it really about what we deem best, or is it less stressful when it comes to defending our decisions to someone else? Is it really us, or are we trying to be someone else? If we’re willing to ask ourselves those hard questions, we may start moving along with tough path of genuinely loving ourselves.

When it comes to making our own decisions and taking our own path, we need to realize that not everyone will agree with us, nor will everything we do turn out the way we hope. We will make mistakes; we will take wrong turns, but at least, we’re the ones making the mistakes; they’re ours and no one else’s, keeping us from playing the victim role.

I’ve come to believe that loving ourselves in the way Jesus intended really has to do with accepting, believing in and trusting ourselves. It is realizing that we are people who have God-given skills and abilities. They’re ours to learn, to grow and develop, and each time we take a step, we believe in ourselves a little more. Each time

we walk through an open door on our own,  
we begin to trust a little more.

I truly believe that God is right here  
with us every step of the way, wanting us  
to love ourselves, accept ourselves, trust  
ourselves. Are we ready?

**Closing:**

The French writer Jean Anouilh  
wrote, **“Our entire life, with our fine moral  
code and our precious freedom, consists  
ultimately in accepting ourselves as we  
are.”**

As we leave here this morning, I  
hope and pray we're ready to love  
ourselves, and know that it is in loving and  
accepting ourselves that we can love  
others.

Have a great Sunday, and go in  
peace. Amen.