

There is an interesting phenomenon in church life that has its foundation in goodness but tends to get skewed toward moral obligation. This concept of serving others to the point of being burned out.

The underlying belief goes something like this. As long as I serve others, by constantly giving of myself, I will be a good Christian. And if I am a good Christian, I will have a sense of belonging and be known as a dedicated hard worker. I will work my way to a sense of worthiness.

I know this way of being well. It began in my family of origin. As this, “As long as I am a good and helpful daughter, I will be loved.” That limiting belief then extended out to my participation in the church. “As long as I am a good and helpful pastor, I will be loved.”

With some of my colleagues it goes even further, “as long as I sacrifice my life for the church, I will be deemed worthy of love and respect.”

I have known gatherings of pastors where it becomes a contest as to who works more hours. I remember one pastor trumping everyone else in the room saying, “Well I have had to sleep in the church some nights because I have so much work to do, I can’t afford the time it takes to go home.”

Maybe you can recognize yourself in some similar pattern that connects doing, rescuing, and serving with our sense of worthiness. In order to be worthy of love and belonging we have to do certain things. And that doing becomes more of a chore than anything born out of joy.

And the truth is that can be a heavy burden to carry. Frankly it is exhausting. Because what happens is we end up feeling frustrated, and unappreciated. What we thought we were doing with our best intentions turns out to be emotionally depleting filled with a sense of dread.

Hafiz uncovers our secret – the secret that we have in common with everyone who walks this earth. “Admit something: Everyone you see, you say to them, “Love Me.” Of course, you do not do this out loud; Otherwise, someone would call the cops. Still though, think about this, This great pull in us To connect.”

Connection is hard wired in us as human beings. Feeling lonely and isolated actually leads to our demise and ultimate death. Do unconsciously we say “will you love me? What do I have to do to get you to love me?”

Our focus is outside of ourselves - figuring out what we need to do to earn or win love. but the truth God's truth is that we are already loved and accepted.

Jesus tells us that the most important commandment is to love God and to love our neighbor as we love ourselves. In my younger years I interpreted this as the way to love God is through serving others.

The part that I neglected was the love of self. Because isn't loving ourselves bordering on being selfish and egotistical?

In our reading from John's gospel today, Jesus reminds his closest friends before he dies. "As God has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete."

Notice he doesn't say, "Work yourselves into the ground. You have a big mission to fulfill when I am gone. You will be rewarded by how much work you do on my behalf. The amount of love you receive is equal to the amount of love that you give. So go out there and get to work. It is all up to you and your effort."

So how do we balance our call to service with abiding in Love?

I think Jesus is being very clear that love comes first. It is a tender kind of love directed towards us – as if we are holding the most vulnerable parts of who we are with love. It is a kind of cherishing of all of who we are – even the parts that we want to hide. Once we allow ourselves to experience this kind of tenderness we no longer feel separated from what we want the most – which is love. It is a love born from within that doesn't depend on the actions of others.

There is such a sense of freedom in this – to rest in that cherishing of our whole selves. Once we let in that love a sense of joy emerges. Love is the foundation to joy, and joy can be the doorway to love. They go hand in hand.

So, let's just try a little experiment right now.

Close your eyes and think about someone or something that brings you joy. What do you notice in your body? Maybe you want to curl your mouth into a smile. Maybe there is a sense of lightness or an opening in your heart. Maybe you can feel a sense of love blossoming within you.

Now take a deep breath and think about someone or something you love. Allow that image to expand in your mind's eye. And then turn that love towards you. Allow love to cherish you. Allow love to tenderly be with the parts of you that hurt emotionally. What is happening in your body? Is there a sense of relaxing or safety?

Maybe you want to smile again. Maybe there is a sense of lightness or an opening in the heart. Maybe you can feel a sense of joy blossoming within you.

I invite you to continue to keep your eyes closed and allow this love and joy to take up residence in your body, in your heart. Imagine that you are being enveloped by this love, soaked in it.

This love that says, “O beautiful child of God, there is nothing you have to do in order to receive this love. This is your birthright, and no one can take it away from you. O blessed one, you are loved so very much. Always have been and always will be. Rest in this love.”

Now there may be a part of you that is squirming. That wants to say, yes, “But, you don’t know me. You don’t know the mistakes I have made. You don’t know the nasty thoughts that I harbor. You don’t know how judgmental I can be.” Just allow that voice to step aside for this moment. Invite it to take a walk outside.

And then come back to that feeling of being held in love. heart opening. No place to go but abiding in this love and joy.

- What would it be like to allow this love to find its home in you and to guide you in your life?
- What would it be like to follow that joy?
- How would your quality of serving others be different?
- What would you let go of and what would you say yes to?

Before you open your eyes, remember this feeling of abiding in love. This is exactly how Jesus wants us to follow him. First comes love, not for others, but for ourselves.

Jesus practiced this way of abiding in love, when he was alive. How many times in the gospels did he go away to be by himself? How many times do we witness him, abiding in God’s love for him?

It was exactly this love, that allowed him to lay down his life. His love was so big that even death could not hold it back. He went to the cross not out of a sense of duty, but as an act of love.

Jesus goes on to say that when we abide in this way, we become friends. It is this kind of love that connects us. It is abiding in this way that we discover that there are no insiders or outsiders, no greater or lesser, no separations or divisions. There is only Love. Our home is that love. And that love is the life force of the world. So, every person we meet is a friend, because Christ is in each one of us.

In this way our service becomes a dance of that love. Our service is born out of the joy of friendship and connection and not out of obligation or dread.

If we are all inherently worthy without having to prove it or earn it, then Joy can lead the way.

Jesus is actually giving us a blueprint in how to be in this world. A kind of service that is born out of love.

Today we could say that it comes down to 3 questions we can ask ourselves on a daily basis:

- What will bring your heart of overflowing love, joy?
- What is love asking of me in this moment?
- How can that joy be shared in this world?

Jesus invites us to trust in this kind of abiding. He says, “I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.”

This is the tie that binds us in Christian community. We come together to dance in that abiding love. To reflect that love with each other with smiles and conversations, prayers and kindness. We come together to witness to each other how God loves each one of us.

“Blessed be the tie that binds, our hearts in Christian love. the fellowship of kindred minds [friends] is like to that above.”

Let us as a community of friends, tend to this abiding love and trust in its unfolding in this community and our world. Amen.