

**THE NEIGHBOUR AND THE AMEN CORNER**

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Scripture says, "You shall love your neighbour as yourself." But what if I don't love myself? How can a person reach out in love to others if they're ashamed of who they are and afraid that they'll be rejected? Even worse, what if they've come to hate themselves? Can anyone fill that void?

This isn't one of the preacher's abstractions. It's a serious problem, one which is exacerbated by social media and carefully curated thirst traps designed to both elicit desire and arouse envy. These days, it's difficult not to feel that everyone else's life is more interesting, glamorous, important—and fun.

But it's not like Instagram and TikTok and whatever else created these feelings of longing and inadequacy. They're seemingly baked into the human condition. We're ineluctably programmed to look to something else—or, more likely, to someone else—to fulfill us, to make us happy, to convince ourselves that we're loveable.

And this dysfunctional feeling of incompleteness doesn't just play out on social media or in human relationships. It plays out where spirituality is concerned, too. It plays out in churches and communities of faith. It plays out in them because for too long we've thought that religion, church going, spirituality—call it what you want—is about being completed, about finding the missing puzzle piece of life that will not only finish us but perfect us. And we think this because there's a terrible strain that runs through Christian history which says that we're rotten and contemptible and must somehow find a way to live that makes us worthy of God's unconditional love.

Now, that's bad enough. But there's something even worse in traditional theology which essentially says that the only way God can look on us is through the perfect filter of Jesus' redemptive sacrifice. I don't buy it—and I say that as a gay man who for many, many years did buy into that way of thinking—no matter half-heartedly. It didn't exactly lead to a positive self-image.

But there was something that led to a positive self-image, and that was the realization that Jesus isn't someone we should imitate—strange though that sounds—but is rather the one who draws out our deepest, truest, and best selves. If only we put ourselves into his hands.

Maybe you've seen The Shaw Festival's production of *The Amen Corner*. If you haven't, you must. There's a powerful scene in the second act in which Luke, a dying jazz musician, confronts his son David who has been brought up to believe his father abandoned the family—when the truth is quite different. Love abandoned Luke. And I think that's why he began to die.

"A man can lose a whole lot," Luke says,

"He can even die, hell, as long as he got that one thing. That one thing is him, David, who he is inside—and, son, I don't believe no man ever got to that without somebody loved him. Somebody looked at him, looked way down in him and spied him way down there and showed him to himself—and then started pulling ... so he could live."

I know, I know: "What would Jesus do?" is a popular catchphrase. And it's one we should take seriously since what Jesus *did* was see beneath the artifice and past the shame to the person who should have been his enemy but was also his neighbour. He saw that the God they proclaimed and ostensibly worshipped was nothing more than their fears and neuroses projected onto the heavens. He saw that people who don't love themselves can hardly believe in a God who does. Which is why he said "You shall love your neighbour as yourself." He spied people for who there were and pulled their true selves out by force of love.

We often hear that the opposite of love is hate. But it isn't. The opposite of love is fear. So we need to dare to reach out in love rather than shrink back in fear. The dying father says that no one ever becomes themselves until someone loves them and surely this means that if we want to make this current hell of existence a little more godly, instead of fearing people whose style of life, or whose political views, or spiritual values or even tastes in landscape design, aren't ours we need to spy—see, affirm, love—them. Doing so may reveal that they're not so different from us after all.

It's tragic that most people's encounter with Christianity is an encounter isn't one which lovingly draws out their best selves, but rather is of the sort preached with righteous legalism in one kind of Amen Corner or another. Sometimes, if they are hurting and confused enough—and there are a lot of hurting and confused people in the world today—they may accept this, at least for a while, and may even believe that in it they have found peace—and perhaps they have; I don't know. All I know is that peace has not found them. When true peace comes to people it comes because their hearts are wide open and when they've conquered their fears—even the greatest one of all, which is the fear of death.

I don't know about you, but I don't want to go on looking out at the world with a fearful eye. I'd rather look out on the world with clear-eyed wonder. I'd rather live in a way that sees the best in my neighbour and brings out the best in me. I'd rather love in such a way that fear is cast out, in the vulnerability which makes reconciliation with neighbours—even those called "stranger," and "outcast," and "enemy"—possible, because all of us are on a mysterious and holy journey into parts unknown. And that

wondrous fact, if none other, should cause us to love our neighbours and ourselves as much as we can.

What would Jesus do? Richard Rohr said, "Jesus tried to change people by loving and healing them." He loved utterly and untiringly, without fear or judgement, showing people who they are and freeing them from paralyzing negativity. He left the only legacy that matters and the only example that endures: a way of loving in such a way that even our lives will prove worth dying for. Amen to that.