

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor
Sermon for October 12, 2008
Lessons: Psalm 42:1-6 and II Corinthians 4:1-15

THE FACE WE SEE REFLECTED

From Greek and Roman mythology comes the story of a young man named Narcissus who falls in love with his own face reflected from a pool of water. He will not release himself from his own gaze to leave the pool or love someone else, and so there he stays, transfixed upon his own reflection. Modern psychology has given the mythical young man's name to a problem, Narcissistic Personality Disorder: "a pervasive pattern of grandiosity, need for admiration, and a lack of empathy."¹ A psychiatrist writes, "The narcissist is described as turning inward for gratification rather than depending on others and as being excessively preoccupied with issues of personal adequacy, power and prestige."² Notice the word "excessively," because I ask you to look with me now, not at a personality disorder that requires professional treatment, but at a spiritual problem for all of us individually and, also, for groups and nations. Narcissism is a harmful form of self-love. Though relatively few people are full-fledged narcissists, we all have the tendencies, and we all have a foundational need for healthful self-love and self-concern. Jesus does not command us, "Love your neighbor *instead of yourself*," but, "You shall love your neighbor *as yourself*."

How can I tell healthful self-love from narcissism, loving myself from being *in love* with myself? Well, there is the old joke: I'm self-assured; he's narcissistic. But the real difference shows in the outcomes: obsessive self-love results in a lack of empathy with other people. There's no room for the feelings of others, because it's all about me and my feelings, my needs and desires, and the feeding of my pride. If I'm being narcissistic, I don't want to listen to you unless you're praising me. If you express a problem, I will turn the conversation to myself, without addressing your problem at all. Why? To the extent that I am narcissistic, I see my own face reflected from every situation in life. There is only my distress, my comfort, my joy.

Now, we need a counterpoint, because human beings can always find more than one direction in which to go wrong. If it is not good for me to idolize myself, neither is it good for me to idolize someone else. The submissive person, eager to please the other at whatever cost to the self, is the very one a narcissist seeks out. Someone I knew once remarked with a dash of wit, "They have the perfect marriage. She thinks he's the greatest man in the world, and he agrees."

So, what's the answer? I could say simply that instead of being self-centered or other-person-centered, we need to be Christ-centered. Instead of seeing my own face reflected everywhere in life, or seeing some other person's face in place of my own, I would see the face of Jesus Christ. And you know what, that is the answer, but we need to ask further "What does that mean?"

To clarify, let's go back to the question of empathy. In psychology, empathy does not mean "feeling sorry for" another person. That's *sympathy* or *pity*, which can be quite condescending and patronizing. "Oh, the poor things, I feel so sorry for them." Nobody wants to be a poor thing. Empathy seeks to understand another person, but with respect rather than a sense of superiority. There's no, "Poor thing" involved, and so the integrity of both persons is respected. Neither is made less than the other. We meet on equal terms, even if I have the distress, and you do not. The empathizing person enters the distress far enough to be respectfully supportive without becoming intrusive or taking over. Paul says to the Galatians, "Bear one another's burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ." And what is the law of Christ? "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." No more humiliating the person forced to accept sympathy, aid, or advice. No more treating the other person as broken or damaged goods.

For the follower of Jesus, empathy can come to involve seeing the face of Christ reflected from the face of the other person. What I mean is that we can learn to see that the suffering person does not suffer alone. It is the form of Jesus Christ crucified we can come to see in the sufferings of others. We see Christ with people made to suffer, even if they do not see him or care to see him at all.

Narcissism prevents empathy, because if life is all about me, then your problems matter only as they annoy me or can be turned around to feed my ego. Remember, to the extent I am narcissistic, everything is about me; I see my face reflected everywhere, and every situation either feeds my ego or means nothing to me.

Healthful self-love can stand its ground even as it empathizes with another person. It neither submits nor seeks to dominate. It walks with the other person, shares the burden for a while but without taking over. It cares but does not fawn. The person in distress remains an independent individual, not a broken item for the fixer to fix.

Remarkably, Jesus did not seek to run people's lives. He did not demand adoration. People whose lives were severely damaged he met with respect and compassion, not scorn or even pity. He did not see people's troubles as being all about him. So, he was able to give himself to and for others, without becoming either a tyrant or a doormat for others to walk all over.

The remarkable thing about God – and this remarkable thing is made human for us in Christ – is not power or even goodness in any lofty sense we cannot attain, but empathy. God does not move in and take over. God respects our right to be ourselves, even while calling us to be ourselves much more honestly, truly, and rightly. Human authorities and powers don't work that way. They want submission and plenty of ego feeding. Despite what biblical Israel and Christianity throughout its history have often imagined and projected, God seems to have a very secure ego and so be remarkably non-defensive.

To see the face of Christ reflected all around me is to see what he wants for us, what he sacrificed for us, what remarkable value he gave to even the lost, broken, and beaten-down among us. It is to see the God-given worth of the other person without surrendering our own God-given worth. Well, that's the end of narcissism. You don't follow along after me, and I don't tag along behind you. We walk together with Jesus Christ, whether we both realize it or not.

For many people in our world, the most important message in this sermon is that it's okay to love yourself. You don't have to keep beating yourself up, putting yourself down, or letting other people push you around or make you feel like dirt. And God is not the supreme critic who really makes you feel like dirt. God loves you, and Jesus Christ came to stand with you and walk with you in life. And if Christ sees you as worth walking with, then you need to see that worth in yourself.

For other people, the most important message is that self-love isn't everything in life. Yes, God loves you, but God also loves the other people in this world. You don't have to be greater than they are to be worthwhile. You can stop trying to validate yourself all day long, because it's not necessary. There is a worthwhile self inside you God sees, and you can learn to see that worthwhile person, too, without constant affirmation. Life need not be your reflecting pool, and you can learn to see other people as persons independent of your need to be admired and praised in order to keep yourself from feeling awful.

We can love ourselves without falling in love with ourselves. We can feel good about ourselves without putting others down or demanding their admiration. We can empathize with people in distress instead of fixating on our own feelings to the exclusion of theirs. We can know we matter in life without taking ourselves too seriously. So, we can win without trumpeting our victories, and we can lose without being devastated. We can accept love, and we can give honestly. Thanks be to God for the redemptive love that keeps giving us hope, for ourselves and for each other. Amen.

Notes:

1. *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*. (DSM IV-TR, Diagnostic criteria for 301.81 Narcissistic Personality Disorder, cited in the Wikipedia article at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Narcissistic_personality_disorder .

2. Millon, Theodore (1996). *Disorders of Personality: DSM-IV-TM and Beyond*. New York: John Wiley and Sons, p. 393. ISBN 0-471-01186-X., as cited in the same Wikipedia article. Dr. Millon's own Web site is at <http://millon.net/> .