



Grow, Pray, Study Guide

March 15, 2015

HELP is strangely, something we want to do without, as if the very idea disturbs and blurs the boundaries of our individual identity, it is as if we cannot face how much we need others in order to go on: we are born with an absolute necessity for help, grow well only with a continuous succession of extended hands, and as adults depend upon others for our further successes and possibilities in life even as competent individuals.

Even the most solitary writer needs a reader, the most Machiavellian mobster a trusted lieutenant, the most independent candidate, a voter.

Not only does the need for help never leave us alone; we must apprentice ourselves to its different necessary forms at each particular threshold of our lives. At every stage we are dependent on our ability to ask for specific forms of help at very specific times and in very specific ways.

Even at the end, the dignity of our going depends on others' willingness to help us die well; the sincerity of their help is often commensurate to the help we extended to them in our own life.

The need for help is never ending and every transformation has at its heart the need to ask for the right kind of generosity, in its right and proper season, and always, always, always, from a source other than our own.

'HELP' in "CONSOLATIONS:
The Solace, Nourishment and Underlying Meaning
of Everyday Words."
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Photo by David White, *Brotherly Help for the Wedding*
Sri Lanka, 2014

Give up loving your neighbor as yourself

by Rebekah Simon-Peter

This Lent, I suggest giving up loving your neighbor as yourself. Likely, they deserve better. So do you.

Because for all the amazing good that transpires without fail in the world each and every day, we are still putting up systems that don't work for everyone. Here's what I mean. We still put up with poverty. We still put up with homelessness. We still put up with persons of color being treated as second-class citizens. We still wage war to settle differences. We still burn fossil fuels, ensuring scarcity and hardship for generations to come.

Yes, we can do better on neighbor-love. That's why my Lenten suggestion this week is to give up loving your neighbor as yourself. Strangely enough, that means doing better on self-love. It all hinges on the word *as*.

In lots of circles, love of self gets a bad rap. It's misconstrued as selfishness, self-centeredness or pride. Who wants to be seen as that? To be "good Christians" we gloss over the love yourself part. Big mistake. Because the love we show to our neighbors is a reflection of the love we show to ourselves: Love your neighbor as yourself. Not to mention the love we show God. Or the love we believe God shows to others.

If we don't love ourselves well, how can we do right by our neighbors? You can't give what you don't have. Thus, we have put up with or perpetuate systems that devalue other human beings and the web of life itself.

The flip side of this week's Lenten suggestion to give up loving your neighbor as yourself, is the permission to practice the art of self-love. In fact, it's a plea!

By self-love, I don't mean seeing yourself as better than anyone else. That's just the other side of seeing yourself as less than others — both signs of lack of self-love.

By self-love, I mean understanding and affirming that you are made in the image and likeness of God. Period. No matter your waistline, your skin color, what kind of hair day you're having, your income, your employment or marital status, the behavior of your children or your parents, how well your church is doing or what your teacher once said to you.

Here's what else I mean by self-love: Understanding and affirming that you are a miracle of life, a sacred expression of God's unconditional, divine love. And this: Thinking well of yourself even when you make a mistake. Giving yourself the gift of self-approval instead of incessant self-criticism. And finally this: Accepting, honoring and valuing your own self.

That's not to say that we ignore the ways we fall short of the mark. Or that we don't ask God to help us do better. It's just that shame and self-condemnation don't work nearly as well on this as acceptance. This Gospel isn't just for privileged or middle-class people. This is for everyone. This is the Kingdom come. One person at a time.

When we are able to reverence ourselves as beautiful creations of God, then we can begin to truly treat our neighbors right. That reverence, defined as a deep respect tinged with awe, spills over into other relationships. Even into our relationship with God.

It's time to reframe all our relationships in light of the command to practice love of self. What about a Jesus who stands with and for all people, with and for all creation? Not against. What about a God who has created all humanity and all creation with the divine spark of beingness? What about a Holy Spirit who dwells within each of us? Period.

Maybe then we'll muster the courage and will to stop putting up with our neighbors being put down.