

Love God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength. And love your neighbor as yourself.

In my preaching and teaching, I focus on the love your neighbor part quite a lot.

But what does it mean to love God? And what does it mean to love yourself? And what does loving God with heart, mind, soul, and strength look like?

In some ways, it's a little like trying to explain the trinity – loving all three is interwoven. We have to look through a mystic's everything everywhere all at once eyes more than our logical one thing at a time eyes.

So, Love God. We can't see God. We can see the revelation of God in scripture, particularly in the person of Jesus. But the first century Jesus isn't here for us to sit down and have a cup of coffee with.

Loving God is the work of the Holy Spirit in us. But our spiritual practices can put us in a place where the spirit can work. Spiritual practices fall into the mind, heart, strength and soul arenas.

Let's start with mind. We can love God by learning and thinking about God. Wanting to learn about someone is a good start to loving someone, whether as a friend, a lover, or just another human being.

We may have lots of preconceived ideas when we first meet someone, but when we actually learn about them, it challenges those ideas.

The same is true for God. We learned at midweek this past week that our social location shapes how we interpret scripture and our understanding of the God we meet there. Studying the Bible from different perspectives...and with different teachers... is a way to love God with our whole mind.

Next we'll look at strength. What does it mean to love God with our whole strength? There are a couple ways to think about strength. The first is the ability to stand strong in the face of ridicule or persecution.

But it also has to do with loving God with our bodies. We do that by serving God's world – by serving our families, neighbors, and communities. We do it by caring for creation – tending a garden or picking up litter.

We do it in the physical actions of worship – bowing our heads, lifting our hands, singing, confessing our faith out loud, giving our offering.

And we do it by caring for our bodies – by paying attention to our physical health. Paul wrote that our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, so caring for that temple is part of loving God.

Next is loving God with our whole heart. This starts to get a little larder for some of us. Love with our heart is an emotional thing.

Metaphorically, the heart is the seat of our emotions. And it can be hard to conjure up a feeling for something or someone we can't see. We can get a start with this in our understanding of how God comes to us in tangible ways. For us, that begins with word and sacrament.

We hear God's word through spoken word or music, we receive the bread and the wine. And through the Holy Spirit Jesus becomes real for us in those things.

A powerful sermon or reading of scripture, a soaring hymn, sung in harmony, receiving the bread and wine – all of those can be very emotional experiences. They may not be every time for everyone, but they can evoke a powerful feeling of love.

The heart kind of love is also the most vulnerable to manipulation and exploitation. Charismatic evangelists throughout the ages have sometimes played on people's emotions for financial gain. And sexual abuse has been a troubling aspect of some of those with power in the church.

Finally, there's soul. Soul is the most misunderstood term in this whole thing. Our understanding of the word soul comes mostly from the Greeks.

In Greek philosophy the immortal soul is something that can be separated from our mortal bodies. That was not the case for Jewish or Jewish Christian understanding. But that's probably a whole other sermon.

What is the soul? Honestly, the best description of soul I came across browsing through the internet came from a completely secular business solutions site rather than any religious site. Here's what it said:

SOUL is the intertwining of the mind and the heart. The soul is the complex of all our knowing and believing. The soul is the complete activity of the inner person. The soul is the representation of who we are on the inside, the summation of our thoughts (or mind) and feelings (or heart).

That comes closer to the Hebrew word for soul, Nephesh, than a lot of other things I've encountered in Christian writings. The soul is the essence of who we are. It's what makes us truly alive.

Loving God with our soul brings it all together.

So what are some practices that can help us love God?

The most helpful way for me is to think about creation.

One of my go-to teachers for spiritual things is Father Richard Rohr. He says that in some ways creation itself was the first incarnation.

In the beginning, there was a shapeless void – chaos...defined in science as an infinite density in the midst of nothing.

A wind from God blew over those waters of chaos, God spoke, and the infinite density became matter and began expanding. God's breath continues to blow and becomes the soul, if you will, of every single thing in the universe.

Jesus became God incarnate in a world already filled with the spirit of God. Then, in a move that especially fills our own souls, the Holy Spirit flows through our bodies.

In that sense, our soul is also God's soul. It turns out that loving God means loving ourselves. Loving God is loving our neighbors.

This sense that God is present in everything and everyone we can see, taste, touch, hear, and smell becomes our key for loving God.

We will each have a spirituality that is dominant – head, heart, or body – that connects us most deeply with our soul...with the God within us. But practicing all of them is important for the whole.

So, your way to love God may begin with learning. Or it may begin with service in a soup kitchen or health clinic. Or it may begin with worship. Or spending time in nature.

Since creation really embodies the presence of God, let's look at some creation spiritual practices through the lens of each spiritual strength.

Loving God in creation through our mind is simply learning about nature. Kids often have a natural curiosity about the natural world – a curiosity that can get lost along the way.

As adults, we can cultivate the practice of curiosity. Pick something you want to learn more about – maybe how to identify different trees or wildflowers. Then dive in.

Loving God in creation through our hearts is the emotional aspect. Watching an animal or child being born or watching cute baby elephant videos often moves us.

But loving God in the natural world that's not so cute takes more effort. It takes spending time in nature in a more reflective or contemplative way.

Meditate on a single leaf that blows up onto your porch...look at the intricacies of its veins, its shape, its colors. Imagine where it's been, imagine its story.

Or go on a walk with your camera and take pictures in nature of things that catch your eye.

Loving God in creation with our bodies involves activity in nature...hiking, tending a garden, picking up litter along a road, doing what you can to help the environment.

All of that comes together in that sense of awe in our souls in the midst of our creation practices.

My daily meditation resource focused on nature this last week. One of the readings brought back a powerful memory for me.

When my son was in the hospital in Chicago several years ago, I tried to keep up with some sort of exercise. It was very, very, cold that December, so mostly that meant using the little fitness center in the hotel. Boring.

Finally, I couldn't take it anymore and decided no matter how cold it was I was going to run the Lakefront Trail along Lake Michigan.

Little known fact – when it's cold enough, the waves from the Lake crash over the trail and freeze there.

So I ended up trying to run on frozen waves. The roughness made it less slick, but it was still treacherous. Part of me felt like an idiot.

But another feeling was just incredible awe at the power in those frozen waves coming off the lake. I felt a sense of oneness with the lake as I skittered my way across those frozen waves.

That is loving God with our soul, with our whole selves. Loving God is a sense of oneness with God...either the God we meet in nature, the God we meet in the soul of another human, or the God we meet in the depths of our own being.

It's loving the God whose own love for us lives and breathes in all creation.