

Joel 2:25-32
Luke 18:9-14

“Christian Pride”
Communion
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November 3, 2013

Today our text from Luke is dealing with the SIN of pride. But wait, you might protest – since when is pride a SIN? O, sure, hubris – that excessive form of pride could be labeled a sin. But what about having pride in one’s family, one’s self; pride in some accomplishment, one’s town, or even one’s church. Pride, considered by itself, can be a most attractive virtue. We parents and grandparents work on instilling a sense of pride – or at least a sense of self-worth, in our children and grandchildren.

To be sure there is a delicate balance here because too much pride can result in arrogance. But the beneficial effects of pride – that sense of achievement, a desire for excellence, an aspiration to do the best that one can do – shouldn’t all of those outweigh and negative aspects of hubris?

I recently read that one of those business management/motivational speakers said, “There is no more important quality to cultivate among the workers in a company than pride in their product.” For years that attitude put the Japanese auto workers ahead of the U.S. auto workers, resulting in what many perceived to be better quality and engineering in the Japanese automobile products.

Yet on the other end of the spectrum, our political life seems to be dominated by “the politics of self-assertion,” and our therapies are so often mostly the relentless psychology of excessive self-esteem. It sure seems as if the great SIN for our age is not pride, but a lack of self-esteem. Somehow though the cruder cousins of pride – arrogance, egotism, vanity and downright conceit – trumped out pride’s worthier cousins of self-respect, self-confidence and self-ascribed dignity. Thus, Jesus’ teaching to “love thy neighbor as thyself” has been shortened to a hard and fast, ruthlessly enforced mandate: LOVE THYSELF!

Perhaps if we were all full of appropriate pride and genuine healthy levels of self-esteem, then there would never be any envy among us and there would never be conflict among us either. The notoriously atheistic philosopher Bertrand Russell said, “I do not believe that any peacock envies another peacock his tail, because every peacock is persuaded that his own tail is the finest in the world. The consequence of this is that peacocks are peaceable birds.”

But really now, is pride so serious as to be considered a sin? There are those who would argue that pride is no more than an error in judgment - the mistake we make when we judge ourselves in far too positive a way. But is that a sin?

Well, for one thing, pride can lead me to spectacularly bad judgments. The person who proudly thinks of him or herself as a genius is on his or her way to make some really stupid mistakes. My first college roommate once told me that ‘there was a thin line between genius and madness, and he had crossed over it many times.’ When he turned on the top light in our dorm room to cut his toenails at two o’clock in the morning, I was given a hint as to exactly what he meant.

Yet, to tell the truth, I can’t think of much that is wrong with a healthy – within limits – sense of pride ... except that Jesus was leery of pride as a slippery temptation. Of course, only a faith that believes that Jesus was the full revelation of God would consider pride as a sin.... Remember, Jesus began his work after having been out in the desert. Just before that he had been baptized and a heavenly voice proclaimed, “You are my Son, the Beloved.” Yet though he was “full of the Holy Spirit,” that same Spirit led him out into that desert, that wilderness, where for “forty days he was tempted by the devil.”

Now, I tend to think of temptation as a kind of ‘midlife crisis sort of thing,’ something that hits you late in the afternoon when you are tired and ‘not focusing well. But the Gospels here portray encounters with the devil as happening early in one’s career – at least - that was the case of Jesus. Alone, in the quiet, out in the desert, voices come; and for Jesus, the voice that comes, after the heavenly baptismal voice, is that of the devil. “IF you are the Son of God...” (That is, if you are who the heavenly voice said you were at your baptism,) “command these stones to become a loaf of bread.”

Now the person who could turn stones into bread could do a lot of good for poor, suffering humanity, and would be canonized quicker than any saint ever was. Can you imagine the sense of self-satisfaction and pride in that? But Jesus says, “No!” Jesus encounters the temptation to pride with his rejection of it. What, we wonder? Has this God – this Son of God, no pride?

What is more, the early Christian writers saw Jesus’ pattern on the cross not only in his human nature but as our vocation as well. Paul writes to the Philippians: “Let this same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus ... being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross” (Phil 2:5-8). It can be a shock to see revealed in Jesus, “the (very) form of God.” That means this self-emptying, humble servant-hood is the shape of God.

Jesus tells the truth about God. God is more – so much more – than omniscient, omnipotent, and all those other highly theological attributes that we

have ascribed to God. God, as revealed to us by Jesus, is also the lowest and the least; the little one, the wretched, the one who hangs on agony on the cross; the one who stoops down and washes our feet, the one who emptied himself in order to get down to our level ... AND the one who rose and thereby shall raise us up as well.

If we worship this God ... if we follow him down his narrow Nazarene way rather than parade down the world's wide boulevards of acclaim, there will be some stooping and kneeling to do on our parts. And I don't know about you, but I am not readily inclined to stoop and kneel. Thus pride is often unavoidable.

Pride is all over... it is present on the good days and the bad days. It is the byproduct of the world's acclaim when my life is doing well. It is a strategy for self-preservation when my life is not doing so well. I might be able to present myself to you as a basically good person, were it not for pride being the first of the deadly sins. I sin, and sometimes when I am doing the best I can, that, thanks to pride, is my worst sin. What is the one thing that one can say about oneself that is completely false once it is uttered? "I am so humble!"

It is like the story I heard about the two old Jewish men who were sitting in their synagogue service. They overhear a rather loud lament of another worshipper near them: "God be merciful to me, a nobody! God forgive me, a nobody! God help me, though I am a nobody!" One of the men looks at the other and asks, "Who's this, who thinks he such a nobody?" I guess, even in the midst of honest confession of sin, there can be a whiff of pride – being proud of being a nobody.

Being in the church helps us with this conundrum however. Often the community of faith is able to show and to tell us things that we cannot learn from anyone else, anywhere else. Fortunately, I have a few family members (Karin) and Christian friends who love me enough, and who love the truth enough to keep my feelings of pride in check. The Holy Spirit works through the community of faith as a remedy against some of our sin. Yet, still I sin, as we all sin. Even in my feeble attempts at rehabilitation, I still sin. Fortunately for me, and for you, the scriptures are unanimous – Jesus came to seek and to save sinners.

The way I see it, the sin of pride is virtually unavoidable. I am, as Martin Luther noted, both a sinner and justified, forgiven sinner at the same time. Therefore we have reason to be grateful that Jesus comes to seek and save the lost – yea, even sinners like us.

As Christians we are here to be conditioned to name pride as a kind of subspecies of the sin of idolatry, of setting ourselves up as gods. What the world calls healthy “self-esteem” Christians “test” to make sure it is not self-worship. The devil in the desert had it right in telling Jesus that he could be empowered to set the world right, to correct all of God’s mistakes at creation; and all that was necessary was to fall down and worship “the me” and “all of this will be yours.”

So Jesus’ story about the Pharisee and the publican at prayer in the temple is a reference to this kind of worship. In worship, our pride gets judged and is hence to be conquered. We are forced by the church to stop looking at ourselves and turn our gaze upon God. We are humbled in worship by our vision of a God who is greater than ourselves, yet who has come very close to us – a God who loves us enough to tell us the hard truth about ourselves and our sin, and yet who constantly forgives our sin, our twisted virtues – including the sin of pride.

For those of us who are following the way of Christ – sometimes stumbling along after him – our pride – our subtle, deceitful pride is the first sin we are to consider and confess. Our pride is part of our self-conceit, our lying to ourselves and to others as to our real situation. As frail, mortal, vulnerable creatures, we react to that vulnerability in futile ways, and one of those ways is with pride. There is something incredibly pitiful about modern, twenty-first century North American people telling ourselves that our greatest need is for more self-esteem, more self-confidence, more self- assurance. That’s pitifully revealing as to how little esteem, confidence or assurance we have in God, and in our being children of God. But then again, from a Christian point of view, that’s the problem – ourselves.

And we would not have had such a problem with ourselves. We would not have had to worry so much about a matter like pride, had we not been encountered by Jesus. He is the one who tells us, not only the truth about ourselves, but also the truth about God. He tells us that we are frail creatures who react to our immortality in inappropriate ways. Thus, we make for ourselves, gods of our own liking who promise to pump us up to appropriate size and durability.

Yet, all of our strutting about with tail feathers fanned; all of our preening and positioning, is only a kind of backhanded validation of the strong biblical truth that we are created as dust and to dust we shall all return (Gen. 3:19).

So what can we do with all of this? What are we supposed to do? “OK gang, let’s get real humble this week. Let’s see if we can out-humble the Methodists next door”?

No, the tax collector's humility wasn't a virtue to be displayed, or something he had worked on. It was simply a realistic assessment of his life and situation. He was a failure at being righteous - and he knew it. He had no hope of setting things right between him and God... except through God.

Maybe the most humble moment in worship lies just ahead of us today. Soon we will be before the table. Here we hold out empty hands. We come like little children – like the famished folks we really are. Here we come with empty hands that have nothing to offer – needing a gift in the worst sort of way.

This act is one of the most counter-cultural gestures that we can retain in our worship and in our world – these empty hands. What is normal and natural, is the clenched fist, the hands grabbing and holding on tight to whatever they can get.

Yet, what we experience here is not only empty hands, but the emptying of the totality of our Savior in an act of utter, eternal humility – “of obedience to the point of death – even death on a cross.” Amen.