

“Sinning Like a Christian: Pride”

Philippians 2: 5-11

“Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus...”

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When you take a look at the Seven Deadly Sins it is really hard to put a positive shine on most of them. Greed, Gluttony and Sloth have quite limited redemptive qualities. There's not much good one can say about Envy or Lust. And last week's message notwithstanding, Anger is seldom seen as anything but a problem. But then there is Pride. Pride is a conundrum wrapped in an enigma, and of all the Seven Deadly Sins, it presents the greatest challenge to Christians. Let me tell you why....

You see there is one line of thinking that says that pride is good, indeed necessary to become a healthy, fully functional human being. The opposite of pride is seen as low self-esteem and the idea is that if you don't think you are any good, it's awfully hard for you to do any good. As some preachers might put it, if you want to love your neighbor, you must first love yourself.

This is why school psychologists emphasize positive affirmation for young children, to build up their sense of worth and accomplishment that they might take pride in what they do, gold stars for good behavior, pride serving a positive purpose. We see the importance of pride in other areas as well. African-Americans were brought to this country as slaves and told by the dominant culture that dark skin and kinky hair are ugly so it makes some sense why they would seek to foster Black Pride that says, “Black is beautiful. Men who love men and women who love women were told, and are continually told, that their love is wrong and not acceptable, that they were somehow malformed. So I understand the importance of the joy and sense of liberation that is present in Pride Month when gay and lesbian men and women parade down the street proudly claiming their true identity.

In the corporate world, pride is an unambiguously positive attribute. Employees are encouraged to “take pride in their work,” and wear that UPS uniform proudly. We’ve got a former Lance Corporal of the United States Marine Corps in attendance this morning. I’m sure Dan Coulter could tell you a thing or two about the positive attributes of pride he learned in the Corps. And taking a page from my own story, in 1986 the West Bend West Spartans football team adopted as its team slogan the buzzwords, “Pride and Desire” and printed up red t-shirts with those words emblazoned across the front for all of us to wear. We might have had Pride and Desire but we severely lacked those other qualities for success on the field, like speed, strength and talent, and that, more than our lack of pride and desire, explains why we went 1-8 that year. In the secular world Pride is considered a constructive attribute, but the Rev. William Willimon, our guide on this journey through sin, is not convinced. He observed that, “The rest of the world, uninformed by the story of Jesus, considers Pride an essential characteristic of the well-functioning personality. [But] Christians are taught to be more suspicious.”¹

We are suspicious because we see how the development of a positive view of one’s self can soon cross over into self-aggrandizement and the love of self at the expense of others. For children, it’s a short journey from taking pride in your accomplishments to a sense of entitlement that rewards kids with gifts and medals and soccer trophies just for showing up on Saturday morning. For oppressed peoples, pride in one’s identity can mutate into the triumphalism of suffering that says my oppression exceeds yours and is therefore more worthy. And for the rest of us, Pride is that slippery slope that starts by simply feeling good about yourself but then extends into smugness, arrogance, ego and vanity. Pride has a way of sneaking into our selves and supplanting humility until we become like the character in the country and western song by funny man, Mac Davis, “O Lord, Its Hard To Be Humble.” You know that one? Well if you don’t, I’ll sing you a little bit:

¹ William Willimon, Sinning Like a Christian. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2005) p. 41.

O Lord its hard to be humble, when you're perfect in every way!
I can't wait to look in the mirror, I get better looking each day.
To know me is to love me. I must be a helluva man.
O Lord its hard to be humble, but I'm doing the best that I can.

As Christians we shake our heads at the arrogance of a Mac Davis (however funny) and cluck our tongues at the braggadocio of a Donald Trump or a Muhammed Ali. We are suspicious of those who flaunt their accomplishments and prefer those persons who offer overt expressions of humility. We're Christians, on guard against pride, so we practice and work at our modesty. We deflect compliments. We adopt an "aw shucks" mentality when others notice our good deeds and righteous accomplishments. We set our sights on humility until we can claim with a great deal of pride that there is certainly no one more humble and down-to-earth than yours truly. I mean really have you ever met anyone more modest than me? I didn't think so. I have to be the most modest Christian in seven counties. We even take pride in our pridelessness.

This is why the monks of the 4th century, when they were drawing up their list of the Seven Deadly Sins decided to list the sin of Pride first, as it was the foremost sin for most Christians. These monks, guys who wore burlap sacks for clothes and ate gruel and prayed for hours at a time, not a showoff among them, they knew which sin was most likely to infect "good Christians." Sure Christians might occasionally succumb to the sins of lust or greed or gluttony but it is pride that haunts our days and their nights – even to pride in our goodness! Micah 6:8 one of my favorite bible verses gives this direction for Christians, that we should, "Do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with our God." But you know what? Those who do justice and love kindness are often quite proud of their righteous and holy work and they don't always do the walk humbly with your God part very well. We take pride in who we are and what we do. We take pride in our pridelessness. We take pride in our goodness. Pride is perhaps the most pernicious of all the Seven Deadly Sins.

So how do we reconcile this persistent Christian predilection for pride? Well, once again, the answer is found in Jesus. In Jesus of Nazareth we have a model of

humility. In our scripture lesson for today, Paul tells the church in Philippi how Jesus, “though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself...and humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross.” (Phil 2: 6-8) If ever there was a person that had a reason to be prideful, it was Jesus, for he was one who was perfect in every way, he was the Son of God. But he passed on the glory and never let the hosannas of the crowds go to his head. Instead he humbled himself that he might better speak to you and to me and might better fulfill God’s work on earth.

When you look at the seminal moments in the life of Jesus you see what I mean. Jesus goes to the river to be baptized by John and John recognizing the incongruity of him, a wild-eyed wilderness preacher baptizing the messiah and says, “I am not worthy to untie the thong of your sandal, you should baptize me!” But Jesus, modeling servant leadership, still kneels before John and receives his blessing. Then at that very moment the sky itself is torn apart and the voice of God declares, “This is my beloved son in whom I am well pleased.” Talk about a pat on the back! This is one heckuva, attaboy, from God in heaven. You would think that following that Amen, that Jesus would just be on fire, fully aware of his power, and start preaching and healing and tearing it up with his ministry. But do you know where Jesus goes? To the wilderness, to fast and pray, and be tempted by the Devil. Jesus never let divine approval diminish his humility or fuel his pride.

In today’s Gospel story we remember the story of Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem. And how did he roll into the big city? Not on a mighty steed but on the back of a simple donkey. And even on the cross, when he is taunted by the Roman soldiers who mocked him as the King of the Jews, when he could have summoned any sort of miracle to save himself and prove them wrong, Jesus kept silent – obedient to the point of death – even death on the cross. Jesus never let the cheers or the jeers of the crowds change who he was.

The life of Jesus is a remarkable model of humility, but guess what? Not a one of us has any chance of living a life absent of pride, because we are sinners and that's what we do, sin. We seek the approval of others and when we get it we can't help but feel it was because of our inherent goodness that we were noticed and recognized. And that's where pride creeps in. Yes, pride will always be with us, so rather than trying to be like Jesus maybe we should just try to be like the man in the Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector. In this story Jesus teaches us, not to be like him, but to be repentant, honest, humble and sincere. That's enough for him. Hear now the words from Luke's gospel.

He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, "God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.' But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted." (Luke 18: 9-14)

We don't have to be Jesus to be humble, we just have to listen to him. Pair your pride with prayer and you will have a prayer to be forgiven and accepted and loved, not because you are perfect in every way, but because you are not, and you know it and know enough to come to God to ask for forgiveness. And the real beauty is that for God, that's enough. God doesn't demand perfection God demands penitence and that is something within reach of all of us, isn't it?