

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor
Sermon for June 13, 2010
Lessons: I Kings 21:1-10 and Luke 7:36-50

THE TWO FACES OF PRIDE

I always find I experience a level of discomfort with our reading from the Gospel of Luke. I really appreciate the overall message which, of course, I'll come to, but the scene is difficult. Picture Jesus, Simon the Pharisee, and other men around the spread of food. They are not sitting in chairs but reclining on cushions. They lean on one elbow and tuck their feet behind them. My discomfort arises from the image of woman kneeling behind Jesus to wash his feet with her tears, dry them with her hair, and kiss them repeatedly. Certainly, she is humbling herself, but the host does not think so. Simon the Pharisee, is annoyed by this woman's effrontery. How dare she touch a teacher of the things of God, a man regarded as a great prophet? Simon registers disgust, not because this woman is degrading herself, but because she does not know her place, which in Simon's eyes is too low and already degraded for her to have the right even to approach a man of God.

We soon see that Simon's purpose for inviting Jesus to dinner is to evaluate him. Accordingly, Simon withholds the customs of true welcome until he judges whether Jesus deserves them. The dinner is less a meal shared in fellowship than an interview, and Jesus is failing the test. "If this man were a prophet," Simon thinks to himself, "he would have known who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him — that she is a sinner." Think what it must be like to live knowing that other people regard you as unworthy to kiss someone's feet — an ancient act and symbol of self-humiliation and submission you are not even good enough to perform. In ancient Judaism, a master could not require his slave even to wash his feet, let alone kiss them. Washing someone's feet was an act of devotion performed willingly by especially devoted disciples or lovers. Kissing them was reserved for conquered enemies reduced to utter shame.

If, however, there is anything in our readings I find even more awkward than this scene, it is the whining King Ahab who sulks because he has been denied something he wants. That's embarrassing! True, I detest whining from anyone at any age and find myself annoyed when even a small child keeps whining to wheedle something out of a parent, but a king? Ahab is shaming himself more than the woman who crashes Simon's dinner party, but he doesn't even realize his self-inflicted shame.

His wife Jezebel does recognize Ahab's behavior as shameful but for the wrong reason, and so she upbraids him for being such a wimp and not just taking what he wants. Is he not, after all, king over Israel? To her, the shame is that a king should not be getting his own way. What good is power that can be denied privilege? The life of Naboth, the rightful owner of the vineyard King Ahab covets, means nothing to Queen Jezebel, just as the life of the woman means nothing to Simon the Pharisee. For Jezebel, contempt for others is the right of those in power, and for Simon it is the right of those with great virtue and piety. For one, pride comes from rank and power; for the other, pride comes from virtue and godliness. In practice, there is little difference.

Pride has always been a difficult concept for Christians. On one hand, pride has long been regarded as the very heart of sin; but on the other, we are rightfully proud this morning of our graduates for their perseverance and achievement. When we speak of self-esteem, that's pride, is it not? Surely, we would not wish our daughters and sons to live in self-contempt or live without dignity. But from a Christian perspective, better self-contempt even than the arrogance of Queen Jezebel with her pride of rank and power. So, we have sensed all along that there is bad pride and good, the pride that "goes before a fall" and the pride that enables enough self-confidence for love, friendship, hope, and even faith. Children need to know they matter in life; they do not, however, need to think other people matter less.

As a child, I was taught never to regard any other person as better than I. I was taught, also, never to regard myself as better or more important than any other person. To the extent that I or any human being can learn that two-fold lesson and to the extent we can internalize it because of Jesus Christ, pride and humility come together for us and join as one self-concept, one sense of self in the human community. Countless, however, are the voices that speak to us from within and without against both sides of the notion of our great but equal worth to God. The power structures of this world are founded upon the premise — no, the creed — that some people are greater, better, and more important than others. Sibling rivalry seems built into us, as from the first that we become conscious of each other we begin to compete. If one is in the parent's lap, the other wants to be. Once when I was a child, my sister (eight years my senior) colored a picture rather quickly. Seeing hers, I colored mine very carefully. Then I fibbed to my mother that both were mine and asked which she thought better. I got my wish, to have my picture judged superior, but my mother was not pleased when she learned of the deception, and my sister was unimpressed. So, instead of pride, what I ended up with was shame.

In the first book of the Harry Potter series, there is a very special but dangerous mirror. People looking into that mirror see their deepest and most desperate desires. The wise, fatherly character tells young Harry, "The happiest man on earth would be able to use the Mirror of Erised like a normal mirror, that is, he would look into it and see himself

exactly as he is.” Most of us, however, are not at peace with being who we are, and so we appease our shame by comparisons that favor us. We may call the favor our comparisons grant us “pride,” but really it is no more than wrongly compensated shame, and our need for it keeps us alienated from each other in this world. What, after all, is bigotry but the projection of our own shame upon another group of people we use to assuage that shame by declaring them somehow less worthy, less human, less honorable? Shame’s, “At least I’m not one of them,” becomes pride’s sense of belonging to a higher, nobler, more worthy order of human being. In short, what struts proudly is just shame overcompensating for itself.

Faith in Jesus Christ reconciles us with God as our God, which in turn enables us to make peace with ourselves — our own human, creaturely selves — as we are, which further enables us to reconcile with each other and the human community. *Love the LORD your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength; and love your neighbor as yourself.*

The woman who washes Jesus’ feet with her tears knows humiliation so well that she has to step up in her self-image to perform an act of devotion beneath the dignity of a slave. Simon’s contempt for her corresponds to her former view of herself. Simon’s own problem as a person, Jesus shows him, is that he does not much need forgiveness. Simon does not even want forgiveness; he wants reward in acknowledgment of his virtue. He wants what he believes he deserves, what he has earned, what his righteousness merits. To Simon, the very idea of grace is an insult. Grace, by definition, is love not earned or deserved; it is forgiveness unmerited. Grace is love that is not commendation but real love, not for what I have done or achieved but for who I am to God. That’s why the prodigal son is welcomed home: his father has never stopped loving him for who he is, even in the depths of his shame (a Jewish guy feeding pigs and wishing he could eat with them) or the outrage of his offense (“I can’t wait around for you to die, Pops, so just give me my inheritance now as cash and I’m outta here.”).

Today, we have recognized achievement and thanked God for the grace that enables it. We need to achieve. We need to strive and be able to enjoy attaining the goals of our striving, at least sometimes. It is the experience of success in learning that furthers a child’s (or an adult’s) education. It is also gaining the confidence to overcome our failures that lifts us to new levels of learning and growth. We need a certain type of pride, which I believe has its foundation, not in shame but in humility that accepts our own humanity and that of others on an equal basis before God. Destructive pride is based in shame overcompensating for itself. Good pride is based in humility accepting itself gratefully as loved and given life by God, to be shared with others.

Jesus never asks anyone to kiss his feet, but he accepts the woman’s devotion as an act of grateful love. Now, she can stand up and start to emerge from her shame. Amen.