

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor
Sermon for June 15, 2008
Lessons: Genesis 1:26-27 and Luke 15:11-24

DIGNITY

Let's start with something that would have been controversial in the church of my childhood and, if it had found its way into a sermon, would have been treated as a negative example. I'm talking about a popular song sung by Whitney Houston and called, "The Greatest Love of All." It says:

I found the greatest love of all
Inside of me
The greatest love of all
Is easy to achieve
Learning to love yourself
It is the greatest love of all

Now, what's the problem with those lyrics? The part I would question today is the statement that learning to love yourself is "easy to achieve." I think that's bravado in the face of a lifetime of being made to feel unlovable unless one measures up to other people's standards. We're not talking here about self-centeredness, arrogance, or contempt for the rights and feelings of other people. We're talking about the healthful kind of self-love embedded in the command, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." That kind of self-love is not "easy to achieve," as the rest of this particular song lets us know when the person declaring her independence from the criticisms and cruelties of others sings out, "No matter what they take from me / They can't take away my dignity." Such defiance of personal loss and humiliation refuses to surrender self-love and self-respect to the judgments of others or even to the self's own feelings of grief and shame. *I will not surrender my dignity to the indignities done to me by time or other people – or even by my own mistakes and failings.*

But, again, what would have been considered the problem with this song in the time of my childhood in the church? Offense would have been taken from the idea that loving myself is the "greatest love of all." The congregation would have been told that the greatest love of all is God's love manifested completely for us in the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. It is to his cross that we look when we hear the declaration, "Greater love has no one than this."

I certainly affirm the statement about the greatness of the love that happened for us in Jesus' crucifixion, which is indeed the greatest love, but I do not go along with using it to degrade love of self. Playing off Jesus' self-giving love that brings our salvation against the kind of self-love we need so we can be capable of letting ourselves be loved by God or by anyone else, that is playing false with the gospel. Yes, the idea of self-love can be misunderstood and so become dangerous to spiritual health, but I have found the danger of self-contempt to be far greater. In our Presbyterian and Reformed tradition, we have often gone too far with insisting upon our not being worthy of God's love, to the point where we have told people they are not worth loving. There's a difference, even if the two statements sound alike. On the positive side, I am reminded that I cannot and need not merit God's love; I can't make myself good enough to deserve it. But on the negative side, such doctrinal overkill starts telling me I am such worthless garbage that there's nothing about me worth loving or redeeming, and that's not the message of the gospel. The idea was to counter false pride that seeks to obligate God because of my supposed merit, not to deny the worth of a person. Put another way, the enemy (the thing we need to avoid) is self-righteous arrogance that scorns others to build itself up – false pride in my comparative goodness – not good pride, a healthful sense of self-worth, that enables me to accept it as true that God loves me.¹

People who do not love themselves, who do not respect themselves, who do not see themselves as worth loving, are thereby forced to accept love or friendship when offered as really something else. The “something else” might be pity or dominance or just foolishness that “doesn't really know me yet but will surely reject me when it does.” Healthful self-love is not the attitude of, “God and these other people here are really lucky to have me in the church.” It's not a sense of superiority, but it's not self-scorn, either. Self-scorn leads to idolizing other people in a way that generates further shame and resentment. We need to be able to accept our own humanity thankfully.

What does it mean to us to be created in the image and likeness of God? It is not a matter of possessing god-like qualities such as reason or virtue. Biblically, the image of God identifies us as the creature made to live in communion with God and to represent God's love and care within the created order, to each other and for God's other creatures. The image of God is a term of *relationship and responsibility*. We are not made to live apart from God or in a state of hostility toward other people. Neither are we created to live in a state of hostility toward ourselves. In creation, God bestowed upon us a dignity that is a gift we can neither take from each other nor give up ourselves. We can deny it, scorn it, abuse it, and beat it down into the dust, but we cannot rid ourselves or each other of this dignity which is a gift from God. We may not see it or feel it or even believe in it, but we cannot completely get rid of it. As long as God loves us, the gift endures. It may be hidden, stained, or torn beyond recognition, but it is there – this dignity created into us.

A friend and I have been discussing self-love and self-acceptance by email. The other day, she wrote something to me that I think matters to us as Christians and as a church. Knowing the way we develop as individuals from infancy on through adulthood, she said that she doubted we could help people very much with the task of changing their long-standing patterns of thought and emotion that direct their responses to life merely by talking *to* them *about* grace. Those little prepositions here become very important: *to* them *about* grace. My friend went on to express some hope that we might help people change significantly over an extended period of time by talking *with* them *with* grace. In the first case, we are telling people what they should be but are not, and what they should accept but cannot. In the second, we are sharing something that we ourselves are still struggling to receive, but we are putting God's grace into the give-and-take of mutual respect and mutual attempts at understanding each other as well ourselves. So we grow together as a church. Or, maybe, we introduce someone, not to the *concept of grace*, but to the *experience of grace* and the consequent experience of learning to trust it, which is not an easy thing to learn.

In a paper about seeing and responding to the image of God in other people, Javier R. Alanís focuses on the middle ground, by which he means those spaces in life where people belong to two different societies but are accepted by neither. He's looking at what people call mestizo or mixed blood and, also, at the disinherited status of the children of undocumented immigrants who do not speak the language of their homelands but do not fit into their new land. In the Southwest, many speak Spanglish, which is neither Spanish nor English but a blend of the two. Jesus, he contends, was one of these people born in a middle-ground region, in his case neither a citizen of the Greco-Roman culture of the empire nor a true citizen of Judea, the Jewish homeland proper. Jesus was a Galilean, a neither-nor. So, Alanís argues, Jesus lived the experience of the "born-nothings" who belong neither here nor there, and he reached out for God to people who were born-nothings of all sorts.²

To see the image of God in another person is to recognize both the dignity created into that person and the kinship conferred upon us by God. The church is the community where born-nothings who belong nowhere, find belonging and are somebody. Alanís calls this community the "kin-dom of God" – the place where each person's dignity is respected and the relationship conferred upon us by God and redeemed by Jesus Christ is acknowledged as we learn grace *with* each other.

I think dignity can make a pretty good starting point: recognizing the dignity of the image of God in each person and speaking to and with that dignity (that dignity-bearing person), even if that particular person hasn't been in conversation with his or her own dignity in a very long time, if ever. From dignity comes respect, and from respect, mutual understanding, and from understanding, empathy, and from empathy, grace. And what comes from grace? Newness of life, hope, and all the Bible means by salvation. Amen.

Notes:

1. Before reading the New Testament lesson, the first part of Jesus' parable of the "prodigal son," I pointed out and explained the three gifts the father has brought for his younger son: a robe (the best one), a ring, and sandals. These items, not worn by servants, represent the dignity of a free man. Though the young man has disowned his father and degraded himself, his father has not disowned him and now welcomes him home. The father will not treat him as one of the hired hands but as his deeply loved son. Neither will the father treat him as a child or keep him on probation until he proves himself worthy.

2. Javier R. Alanís, "The Imago Dei as Embodied in Nepantla, a Latino Perspective," in *Perspectivas*, Fall 2006, Hispanic Theological Initiative Occasional Paper Series, Rubén Rosario Rodríguez, editor, Princeton Theological Seminary.