

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor
Sermon for September 14, 2008
Lessons: Psalm 27:7-14 and Mark 2:23-28

EMPTY-HANDED

You are walking up the driveway to a friend's house for a picnic held in celebration of some success in your friend's life. The instructions were to bring nothing, just come. Suddenly, you see that other people arriving are carrying gifts. You have come empty-handed. What you feel is not guilt, because you still believe you have responded properly to the invitation, but now you are embarrassed.

Being empty-handed is an image of shame. The old practice of picking teams shamed the last children chosen by judging them empty-handed. *You bring no skills to the game.* Grown men still cringe inside at the mention of picking teams. We need to know we have something to offer that other people value. Yet, the old and once popular American Protestant hymn, "Rock of Ages," declares in song:

Nothing in my hand I bring. Simply to thy cross I cling;
Naked, come to Thee for dress. Helpless, look to Thee for grace;
Foul, I to the fountain fly; Wash me, Saviour, or I die.

Count the images of shame in that one stanza! Empty-handed, clinging, naked, helpless, foul, and filthy. Six times in one verse we confess to being ashamed of ourselves and rightly so. Why? Are we truly so disgusting to ourselves that we believe we must present ourselves as disgusting to God?

This subject is a very touchy one for Presbyterians because our Reformed tradition rejects all glorifying of human beings, their relative goodness, or their accomplishments. That's why choirs and even musical instruments were forbidden by our ancestors in the Old Broad Street Church. There were to be no performances in worship because all glory was to God alone. Worshipers came empty-handed, and even the offerings of money were goods returned, not truly given, to God, as another of our hymns confesses:

We give Thee but Thine own,
Whate'er the gift may be;
All that we have is Thine alone,
A trust, O Lord, from Thee.

Why do we Protestants, especially Reformed and Presbyterian Christians, insist upon presenting ourselves before God empty-handed? Do we like shame? Are we self-hating? Do we think running ourselves down builds God up, as though God needed an ego boost?

The reason lies in the primary doctrine of Protestant Christianity: grace. We are justified by God's grace alone. There is no such thing as merit in any person who stands before God. No one deserves God's love or mercy. Jesus himself says, "Why do you call me 'good'? No one is good but God only." Well, if Jesus will not lay claim to goodness of his own, what Christian dare claim any?

"By grace alone" is what I teach and preach, but there is such a thing as doctrinal overkill. Martin Luther and John Calvin, the great reformers, were not writing and preaching in casual comfort, musing at their leisure. Their fight was bitter and deadly. Both risked being imprisoned, tortured, and burned to death. Yet, much more on their minds than their personal safety was the crisis of the church and of the faith itself. Merit was the enemy of God's grace, and notion of human merit before God was corrupting the church and exploiting believers through fear and guilt. The reformers knew that if they gave merit an inch, it would take a mile. God's love had to be recognized as its own sole motive for caring about us, and love cannot be earned or merited. It cannot be given under obligation. So it was imperative that Christians realize God cannot be obligated to us by anything. This we affirm. This I will not deny. From God's grace alone come our hope and salvation, now and forever.

One of the first things I noticed about South Jersey beaches was the drastic reduction in undertow, I guess because there is no drop. On first visiting Ocean City, I discovered that the beach ran smoothly out into the water. At the beaches I had known as the Jersey shore, you will experience, if you wade into the ocean, a sudden drop – not a great drop, but great enough certainly to gain a child's respect. You will also feel significantly more undertow. The ocean both pushes and pulls, and the stronger the waves that broke upon my back (which I considered great fun for riding), the stronger the drag of the undertow.

Luther and Calvin's necessary emphasis on grace alone produces what I am calling doctrinal undertow. I need to know that I can bring no merit of my own to present before God; otherwise I will reject God's grace in the false belief that I deserve God's reward and favor above other people. But does having no merit to present mean I have no worth in God's eyes at all? Must I always be empty-handed? Must I see myself as helpless, naked, and foul? Is any sense of my own worth or delight in my own accomplishments an affront to God, a rejection of Jesus Christ? Is Christianity, of necessity, a religion of shame?

The psalmist is not ashamed but frightened and with good reason. He calls upon God for help because he believes with all his heart and mind that God cares for him and delights

in God's people. Well, if God delights in us, then God must see something delightful about us. Just because we have no merit with which to obligate God does not mean we have no worth, no competence, no strengths, no qualities that can possibly delight God. Do we love our children because they deserve it, because they are better than other people's children, because we are obliged to love them? No, we love them because they are our own and we love them. God gives them to us to love. But does that mean we take no pleasure in their accomplishments? Must we always tell them not to feel good about themselves, not to take justifiable pride in their achievements? Should we put them down and shame them any time they dare speak favorably of themselves or beam with satisfaction over a job they have done well?

I hear something over-proud sometimes in the Christian response to thanks or praise, "Give God the glory." Glory? Who said anything about glory? If one of you tells me after the service that you liked the sermon or got something helpful from it, I say, "Thank you." But in other churches where I have preached, my "thank you" has been rebuffed with, "Give God the glory." Wait a minute. If the sermon moves a person toward being changed by the grace of God, that is the work of God's word and Spirit, and, yes indeed, praise and thank God for it. But I wrote the sermon. God could do much better, and to me there's a country mile of difference between conversational appreciation of a sermon and anything that qualifies as glory. Appreciation of each other's efforts strengthens faith's community and invites further conversation or reflection. Yes, God works through our efforts of faith, and I pray and hope for God's guidance in preparing sermons, but I would feel silly attributing glory to anything I had written or imagining my "Thank you" stole glory away from God.

We need to be aware of doctrinal undertow because it drags people away from the church and away from Christ. Grace and shame are not partners in our salvation. God does not have an ego problem that requires us to put ourselves down. Doctrines are made for people, not people for doctrines. I think this matter of appreciating each other and ourselves needs to become an open, ongoing conversation. I suspect many if not all of us have been caught in some undertow from Christian beliefs – something that has pulled us back from honest faith. We need to talk. We need to hear each other and ourselves, within the safe context of a church that offers understanding rather than judgment. Keeping quiet about our doubts and, maybe, resentments of the faith only gives them power over us and our lives.

Grace alone? Yes. But God's grace is love and mercy that delights in us, not foolishly like an over-indulgent parent who sees no wrong in anything the child does, but delights in us nevertheless. Can we learn to delight in ourselves without arrogance, without scorn for others in the sibling rivalry of life, and without egotism? Yes, I believe we can, for it is shame that drives us to arrogance and scorn. God's grace enables us to work through shame and be free. Amen.