

Sunday: Lent V, Cycle C, 3.13.16
 Scripture: Is 43:16-21/Phil 3:8-14/Jn 8:1-11

LET YOURSELF BE LOVED

Tossing off a compliment is a rather easy thing to do. Someone starts to heap on praise and we say: *Oh, it was nothing.* Few of us can receive a compliment well. Many of us were taught that we should try not to look too good in front of others. Better to be humble than proud. **Humility** is an okay thing because we do it ourselves. Like a jacket or sweater, we control when we put on humility and when we take it off. **Humiliation**, on the other hand, is something to which we say: “No way!” In the face of humiliation we experience fear and panic. There are many reasons for this. We have learned to take care of ourselves and we pride ourselves in doing so. We try to avoid all situations in which we might fail. We’re reluctant to try our hand at something new, because we might look foolish. We cover over our personal inadequacies with the cloak of airtight perfection. We fear age or sickness that makes us totally dependent on others for everything.

A friend of mine attended his twenty-fifth class reunion from college a few years ago. At the reunion, an address was given at the dinner by a man who had been the class president as a senior. In college, Bill was captain of the football team. He was extremely successful and

able-bodied. At the twenty-fifth reunion, he returned in a wheelchair as a paraplegic, due to an automobile accident. This is an excerpt from his address:

What I have learned, what I continue to learn daily is that there is only one way to put humpty-dumpty together again: Let yourself be loved! Now ‘let yourself be loved’ may not sound terribly profound, but it must be heavy, because it took me all these years to figure it out. And the truth is, we were taught just the opposite. We were taught to do the loving, and never mind the being loved. A crippling disease is just one of fate’s ways of undercutting muscular love. The able-bodied can be brought to the truth through hurts that never show. I think it’s likely that I am not the most seriously wounded among us, only the most conspicuously-bandaged.

Sooner or later every one of us will be made to feel flawed, inadequate, powerless. And there’s no defense against it. Believe me, the humiliation is devastating. To lose control of the situation is unmanly, un-American, unforgivable. Fear of losing control may be the motive for the frantic banking of wealth and power during the middle years, so that, when erosion sets in, others may be commanded, not asked, to make up what is lacking.

The alternative is to let yourself be loved; not pitied, indulged or pampered -- but loved. It is sometimes a matter of asking others, even those

we have no claim on, to make room in their plans for our needs. It is sometimes a matter of not asking, but of waiting and trusting others to sense our wants. It is always a matter of expecting to be loved. Jesus asks us to become like little children because little children expect to be loved. For them, life is surprise and delight. For us, life can again become surprise and delight, if we let ourselves be loved. And the time to begin is now, because asking for help, for understanding in small things will prepare us for the day when we must ask for help and understanding in larger things. More than that, it will put us in touch with the truth about ourselves and about every other human being: We are precarious; we are mortal; but, we are loved.

Humiliation, no matter what form it takes in our lives, strips us naked. It leaves us with nowhere to run and hide. The gospel story which confronts us late in this Lenten season graphically depicts a scene of humiliation as it presents the woman taken in adultery. She stands humiliated before her male accusers, dragged into the open. The cards are stacked against her as the doctors of the law triumphantly announce her crime. She's made vulnerable unto death, as the stones and rocks are already in her accusers' hands. She is used by the Pharisees as a kind of "visual aid" to trick Jesus. In her humiliation, she finds Christ. His look

of compassion brings her healing; his words of mercy soothe her troubled heart; his gentle touch calms her shaken spirit. Jesus restores her shattered dignity and sends her off forgiven and affirmed.

Her story is a story for each of us. The Word of God shows us a **new way of being**. When we try so desperately to avoid humiliation at all costs we can find ourselves bound up in selfish concerns -- saving face, looking good in front of others, never being wrong. Avoidance of humiliation makes us "no-risk" persons; it creates for us an illusion of self-sufficiency. Jesus, our model and good shepherd, was just the opposite. He was completely free, unencumbered by fear of what others thought of him. He was able to risk himself fully. He was totally dependent upon God his Father. And he accepted the ultimate humiliation: to be mocked and spit upon by his accusers, to be crucified with thieves, to be jeered at as his life's blood flowed out.

St. Paul, too, in writing to the Philippians, speaks out of his own experience of humiliation and rejection. He was a persecutor of the church of Christ, justified by the Law of Moses. He had all the answers, followed all the rules. But, his conversion to Christ blinded him and brought him low. As he began to proclaim the very gospel he once tried to destroy, people must have run from him. How could the former persecutor

of Christians now take up the cause of Christ? In his humiliation, Paul saw that, finally, nothing counts. All things -- knowledge, strength, power, possessions -- all is rubbish compared to having a share in Christ. "*All I want*," Paul writes, "*is to know Christ and the power of his resurrection, and to share his suffering by reproducing the pattern of his death.*" This process of being formed into Christ is a life-long goal and, like St. Paul, we run the race and press on for the prize -- victory in Christ. It's not our work, however; it's God who does the new deed, God who is at work in us, forming us into Christ.

The first word we heard today in our scriptures is the last word: as Isaiah proclaimed, God is doing a "new deed." God is at work forming us into Christ. It's not **our** power, **our** knowledge, or **our** goodness -- it is God at work **in us**. We'll never know that until we know our dependence on him, a dependence that **frees** us -- frees us from the **fear** of being humiliated, frees us to **risk** for the love of God and others, frees us from the most debilitating of all illusions, the illusion of our **self-sufficiency**. *All I want is to know Christ and the power of his resurrection -- and to share his suffering by reproducing the pattern of his death.*

The following verses were written many years ago, attributed to an anonymous soldier of the Confederacy. They echo our scriptures and conclude our reflection:

*I asked God for strength
that I might achieve;
I was made weak that
I might learn humbly to obey.*

*I asked for health
that I might do greater things;
I was given infirmity
that I might do better things.*

*I asked for riches
that I might be happy;
I was given poverty
that I might be wise.*

*I asked for all things
that I might enjoy life;
I was given life
that I might enjoy all things.*

*I got nothing I asked for
but everything I hoped for.
Despite myself
my prayers were answered.*

*I am among all people
most richly blessed.
Amen.*

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