



Sermon of July 18, 1999



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"THE SOURCE OF SELF-ESTEEM"

I Samuel 16:1-13

Romans 8:14-25

About ten years ago the California Legislature funded what they called the "Task Force on Self-Esteem." I remember it received a lot of recognition, a lot of satire and criticism as well.

Doonesbury, the comic strip, took after it. For instance it had Boopsy, the actress who has out of body experiences, volunteer to be a part of the task force.

Of course the national press jumped on this, and had a field day. Some of the members of the task force looked like the stereotype of the California New Age type. I remember someone suggested that maybe they ought to paint a giant smile button on the dome of the capitol in Sacramento, and make it the state emblem.

So it got a lot of kidding, and it didn't last very long. But the problem that it talks about is still

with us. It has always been with us, and it is very real. There is no doubt that the kind of life that you live, the success that you have in life, is in large part dependent on how you feel about yourself. And it is also true that failure is not so much the cause of low self-esteem, but low self-esteem is so often the cause of failure.

The Bible talks about that. In fact most of the stories in the Bible, both in the Old and New Testament, are about how God chooses those who are lowly and exalts them. He takes the oppressed and sets them free. He takes the unlikely and empowers them to do wonderful things.

The Bible stories are not unlike fairy tales in that sense. That will shock some people, because so many people think that fairy tales are simply fantasies for children. But fairy tales come out of a world that was like the biblical world, with a few people at the top, and a great number of people at the bottom. The rules and the customs of society were designed to keep it that way. So fairy tales were tales told by the people at the bottom as a literature of hope, telling the stories of the lowly being exalted, the poor becoming rich, the innocent and the naive outwitting the wise of the world.

The most famous of these stories, of course, is "Cinderella." It comes from a society in which step-children were at the bottom of the family hierarchy. Step-children and orphans were in large numbers in those days because of the high birth mortality rate, and because of the epidemics and plagues that swept across whole societies.

Step-children were not entitled to the same benefits that were given to those, who by accident of birth, were given higher status in this life. Step-children were told that's just the way the world is. You can't do anything about it.

So when the prince came looking for a bride, the daughters were the only ones brought out, the step-daughter was left in the kitchen. Only the privileged are going to be considered. But there is a marvelous surprise. The slipper fits only the lowly step-daughter, who is thereby elevated above her step-sisters, and becomes royalty.

That story is told over and over again in the Bible; the lowly exalted. But no where is it told as wonderfully as in the story of the anointing of David as king. It is time to pick a new king in Israel. King Saul has lost his popularity, and probably also his mind. Samuel is sent by God to find a new king. Now you expect that Samuel will look for somebody like Saul, because Saul looked like a king is supposed to look. He is described that way: tall, handsome, regal. The text says, "Saul stood a head taller than anyone else in the land." I just lay that out there for you to ponder.

The expectation is that the king is going to look like Saul. He will come from a prominent family as well, an important tribe in the nation. But God sends Samuel to a dusty little town called Bethlehem, to the tribe of Benjamin, the least likely place that you would ever look for a king, to the house of Jesse, who has eight sons.

Just as in the Cinderella story, Jesse lines up his seven sons for Samuel to inspect. All except the youngest, David, who is out in the field shepherding the flock. He has the lowliest position in

that society as a shepherd.

Nothing is said about this in the text. David doesn't complain about it. Nothing is said because he knows his place. It was the tradition of that society, the youngest is the least entitled. If the laws of the world therefore are to be followed, then David is last in line, and the seven older brothers are the ones to be considered for honors and privileges. It is virtually impossible that David would ever be chosen. So he is assigned his proper place, to tend the sheep, while his brothers audition for royalty.

The seven sons stand there in front of Samuel. Eliab is the oldest. He is the obvious choice. Samuel looks at him, and says to himself, "This is going to be easy. Here is a king if I ever saw a king. This is he. I can catch an early flight, be back in the office by 5:00 p.m."

But God says to Samuel, "Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for I do not see as the world sees; the world looks on the outward appearance, but I look upon the heart."

There it is. That's it. "I do not see as the world sees." That is a most revolutionary statement, not only three thousand years ago, when this story was first told, but even today. Most people even today believe that God sees the way the world sees. Most people believe that God has arranged the world the way it is. We said that about segregation. We even said it about slavery. We said it about women and their place in society. In fact whenever any one group is on top, and there is another group on the bottom, the group on the top will always say, "Don't blame me for this. This is God's doing."

We believe that God sees the way the world sees. Most people believe status quo means, God made it this way, so don't touch it. But the truth of the matter is, from the biblical perspective, the world is in rebellion from God, and the purpose of God's intervention into the world is to redeem the world. Not to bless it, but to change it.

The world, as that word is used in the Bible, doesn't refer to geography. It refers to sociology, to politics and to economics. It refers to the way the world is structured for people, the laws, the customs, the traditions that order life.

That world, the biblical world, was hierarchical. We live in a democracy that was supposed to dismantle hierarchies. But if you've noticed, all societies arrange themselves into some sort of hierarchy, always a few at the top who are privileged, and a great mass of people at the bottom who are oppressed. The few at the top, we say, are clearly important people, obviously blessed by God. Those at the bottom, unimportant, don't even know their names, and either cursed by God, or ignored by God.

The Bible is a reversal of that. And no phrase announces that reversal more clearly than "I do not see as the world sees; the world looks on the outward appearance, but I look upon the heart." Which means that God doesn't care what the world says about you. God loves you as God's child. God sees the heart. The heart was the essence of the person, so to say God sees you the way you really are, the way you are supposed to be. God sees you the way your mother sees you, not as the way others have categorized you.

So Samuel rejected Eliab, the oldest son. Then he rejected Abinadab, the next oldest. Then he reject Shammah, and on down the line, all seven sons are rejected. Samuel turns to Jesse, and asks, "Do you have any more sons here?" Jesse says, "Yes. There remains but one, the youngest, out guarding the sheep." Jesse says, "Go fetch him." "And he went, and brought him in. Now he was ruddy, and had beautiful eyes, and was handsome. And the Lord said to Samuel, 'Anoint him; this is he.'"

What a wonderful story. It's a Cinderella story. Actually Cinderella is a David story, because the David story is a prototype. Cinderella is the retelling of the David story for another situation, to bring this message of liberation to another society. The prototype is the David story. This is revelation. This is where we heard about it. The least is the most important to God. The one that nobody imagines would ever succeed has a chance of succeeding. The lowliest can be elevated to the highest.

Look again at that description of David as he comes out of the field. "He was ruddy, and had beautiful eyes, and was handsome."

I have this theory. There is nothing that contradicts this theory in the story, so that gives me permission to expand on the story. The rabbis used to do this. They would expand the story. It was called Midrash. They did it in order to make the story have meaning to the particular situation they were addressing. It was called Midrash.

That is what I want to do with this verse, "He was ruddy, and had beautiful eyes, and was handsome." I suggest that David was really ordinary, and plain, and perhaps even homely. Appropriate to the position that he held in that society, the anonymous man. You didn't even notice him. But it was not until Samuel said, "This is the one," that David became "ruddy, and his eyes became bright, and he was handsome."

I have seen that happen. So have you. The beauty that reflects the radiance that is inside a person. It's the power of knowing that you are somebody, you are worthy. People who are told that they are important walk with dignity in this life. People who are told that they are beautiful from the time that they are babies, they become beautiful. That's the way it works.

James Angell tells about his youngest son who came home from school with a paper. It was his first written story in school. He was very proud of it. It was what you would expect from a small child. It wasn't great literature, but the teacher had written a note on the side of the margin, that said, "I see here the beginning of eloquence."

That's an anointing. It's a way of saying, I don't look on the outward appearance, I don't look on the awkwardness, I don't look on the clumsiness, I don't look on the mistakes. I look on the heart. I look on what is potentially there. I don't see the way the person is now. I see the way the person is potentially, what he or she can become.

It happens that way. I think we all begin life eager to experience the life that has been given to us as a gift. We do it without fear. We move into the world as children, with no fear at all. But after hurts, and rejections, and after the world has put us in our place, then we begin to live according to the place in which we have been put. But it doesn't start that way.

A little girl walking across the campus of the College of the Pacific up in Stockton. Back in those days Tully Knowles was the president of the College of the Pacific. He was a distinguished president, legendary, famous across the country. Tully Knowles caught up with the little girl. She was apparently taking a shortcut across the campus to go to her house. He starts talking to her. They stop, carry on a conversation while they are standing there. Then it occurs to Tully Knowles that the girl's parents are probably concerned about where she is. So he tells her to go on home, saying, "You tell your mommy that you were talking to Tully Knowles." She said, "You tell your mommy that you were talking to Sarah Albright."

Now that's self-esteem. That is exactly the way it looks. It pays no attention to the world. It pays no attention to the structures that the world sets up to put us in our place. But after a while, the world sorts us out, tells us who we are, tells us what our place is. "This is assigned to you. You stay there now." We begin to live the life that has been assigned to us.

If you understand that, then I think you can understand what the gospel means when it proclaims that God has sent Jesus into this world to redeem the world, to set us free, and to make it possible for us all to have life, and have it in abundance. That is the gospel.

Once again it is Paul who has expounded it so eloquently. It is our New Testament lesson, the 8th chapter of Romans. He says we are chosen, just the way David was chosen. There is no worldly reason for it. It's done by grace. God just chose us. You can't say, "Here are the things about me that God was impressed with. That's why he chose me." You can't say that God conferred this high honor upon you because of the achievements you have made in this life. You can't say that. All you can say is, "Amazing grace! How sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me! I once was lost, but now am found."

You were chosen at your baptism. That's what baptism means. That's what is so wonderful about infant baptism, the tradition that we practice, because it says that you were chosen before you even knew who you were. You hadn't accomplished anything in this life, you were just a baby. Baptism is like an anointing, like David's anointing. In fact it is the same gesture, putting something on the head of the person. The way kings are anointed, is the way we baptize babies. It is to say, you are chosen by God's grace to be a child of God. Paul puts it this wonderful way.

For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the spirit of adoption.

That is another wonderful metaphor of grace. To say that you are adopted is to say that this didn't happen because of your efforts. This happened simply out of God's grace.

When we cry, "Abba! Father!" it is the Spirit himself bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him.

Then in the next paragraph Paul pictures the whole creation striving to become what God created it to be. The image is childbirth.

We know that the whole creation is groaning in travail together until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves.

It means you groan inwardly to become who we know God created us to be. What that means is that once you hear this good news of who you are, you are now given grace to become it. It is now up to you to become who God created you to be. It's not easy. It's like the pain of new birth. Or the pain of growing up. The pain that comes from rejection and failure. The pain that you experience when you want to be somebody, but the world keeps putting you in your place, and saying you're a nobody. Paul wants you to know that the gospel means, that's not right. You are a child of God. Now live that way.

Living with a school teacher means I have heard a whole lot of stories about children. Many of them about kids who are groaning inwardly to become the persons that God created them to be. Jean has often taught eight year old's. She has told me really some of the most pitiful, and yet beautiful, stories about children, who at eight years old have already been told that they are nothing. They have already been given a place in this world, told that they are not going to amount to very much. Life has already assigned them their place. Many of them respond with behaviors that are appropriate to the labels that have been placed upon them.

I praise teachers. Because in this society, many times, the first adult who looks into the heart, and not just the outward appearance of a child, the first adult that tells a child, you are important, is a teacher that they meet in public school.

Jean told me this story. One day many years ago a boy was disruptive in class. She sent him to the counseling center, which is kind of like going to the penalty box in a hockey game. He returned, was disruptive again. This time she sent him to the principal's office. It was not a good day for him. He returned to the class again in time for P.E., which was a big relief to a teacher with a boy like that. There he tried, he tried to do his best, he tried to behave. It was not outstanding compared to others, but it was the best that he could do. The P.E. teacher recognized it as such. When the class returned to the room, the teacher commended the boy for his behavior.

In that class achievement is rewarded. Good behavior on the playground will get you a medal. So at the end of the day this boy, who had been reprimanded twice, stood before the class and received a medal that said, "Daily Sport," and got an ovation. When the ovation died down, a little girl in the class said, "I love a happy ending."

He earned it. But it was also an act of grace, an awful lot of grace. He tried the best that he could. And compared with others, it wasn't very good. But there were those there who knew him not by his outward appearance, but by what was in his heart. And they looked upon him not for what he had done, but for what he wanted to be. And they were giving him every possibility, every opportunity, for a happy ending. That's grace.

*Help us to be masters of ourselves,
that we might be servants of others,*

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