

February 6, 2022
Fifth Sunday After the Epiphany

“Esteeming the Lord”

Luke 5:1-11

The concept of self-esteem was first documented by a psychologist in 1890. The idea of self-esteem then was that if you do good stuff it results in feeling good about what you've done and thus creates self-esteem based on an actual thing. Somewhere along the way in the last several decades we tossed the “do good stuff” part of the equation out the window and now self-esteem is simply feeling good about yourself even though you've accomplished nothing worth feeling good about.

In the 1950's 12% of teens agreed with the statement “I am important.” By the 1980's that number increased seven fold to 80%. Even the folks writing about self-esteem have no basis for it. In 2005 a study found that of more than 15,000 articles published regarding self-esteem, less than 200 met any standard for scientific rigor. I hate to pop your balloon, but what passes for self esteem in our culture today very, very often has no basis in reality. Feeling good about yourself and thinking that you're important when there is no factual basis for doing so, well that's pretty much just being a narcissist.

The truth is that as more scientific psychology studies are done, we're actually finding out that high self-esteem based on nothing is actually detrimental to a stable mindset and personal fulfillment and happiness.

I bring all that up because Peter has no self-esteem in the face of Christ. When Peter says “*Depart from me for I am a sinful man*” he isn't claiming to be a sinner like all people are sinners. He is stating that he is a lowlife, an outcast, a man so depraved that the holy and divine can never have any part with him. Peter does not yet know all that Christ is, but he knows himself enough to know Christ is above and beyond his poor, miserable person.

Jesus reacts to Peter's self-abasement with the Gospel: “*Do not be afraid: from now on you will be catching men.*” He calls Peter and the others to follow Him as disciples.

We do well to make note of this. Consider how many folks in the Bible approached Jesus with high self-esteem and the result of those encounters. The folks in Nazareth ranked themselves above a carpenter's son, and Jesus left their midst. The Pharisees counted themselves righteous and fell under Christ's judgment. Even that rich young man that Jesus loved, he felt good about himself for keeping the commandments but ended up walking away from Christ in sorrow. Folks who come to Jesus feeling good about themselves generally don't end up being well received by Jesus.

This should be quite worrisome for us whose culture just oozes feelings of entitlement and self-esteem simply because we suck wind. We come at just about every aspect of life thinking we are deserving of recognition, respect, dignity and often special treatment simply because I am me. And sure, you can go ahead and make the argument that you do indeed deserve common courtesy and prompt service. But if that's your daily default mode in life, can you be so sure you're turning it off when you come before God?

It might surprise you to hear this, but a super-popular phrase in today's Christian church sets off all kinds of alarm bells in my head. It happens when someone says you need or that they have “a personal relationship with Jesus.” That's surprising because yes, there are indeed ways a Christian very personally interacts with God; earnest private prayer being at the top of the list. So yes, it's a thing.

But typically when Christians talk this way they aren't referencing prayer. They're talking about some exclusive between-me-and-Jesus thing they've got going on. A one-on-one connection that, in the end, makes them kind of special in their own mind, gives them some spiritual self-esteem. A real obvious place this happens is some worship services where the point of being there isn't the Word or the divine gifts of God—it's the music helping work one up into a spiritual frenzy where one can actually feel...special...set apart...spiritual....whatever. It makes you feel good about you and where you stand before Jesus.

I'd like to remind us that the epistles of the New Testament aren't written to individual people about individual people developing a personal relationship with Jesus. They're written to churches and they're written about what the divine Son of God has done to call people into His church. The Gospel isn't about you feeling good about you. The Gospel is about the good and holy Jesus changing you, transforming you from the fallen creature you were into the holy creature His blood has made you. And since His ascension to glory the Holy Spirit has been doing this work not through one-on-one personal relationships, He does it through the people called into communion with Him in His church.

Why am I making this point? Because it really needs to be made. Think about it, how many people are not gathered together today in worship because they think they have "a personal relationship with Jesus" home in bed, out on the golf course or wherever they want to be? There's a lot of them. How can they so easily ignore Scripture's call to gather, ignore the example of the church throughout the centuries, ignore the Savior's clear direction "Do this in remembrance of me"? Well, they're special and feel good about themselves, even though there's no reason for it. It's really that simple.

How can so many folks gather together in worship and hear not a single accusation of sin, a single call to repentance, not one proclamation of forgiveness in Christ yet feel so wonderfully spiritual? Well, they feel good about themselves because, well, they suck wind and the music is groovy so everything's hunky dory.

St. Paul writes, "...strive to excel in building up the church" and in all of his letters focuses on the Christ who gives His precious gifts there, not on the specialness of the people who receive those gifts. Well scratch that—He does talk about how Christ's claim makes people special children of God. But his point is always to esteem the glorious Christ, not the redeemed Christian.

All of this has one aim, that you who are here in the house of God today are coming before Christ rightly.

They say "form follows function" and a lot of that goes on here. We gather facing the altar, a place of sacrifice, a "holy space" from which a rail separates us. This reminds us that Christ alone is the special one, the holy Son of God sacrificed to win us salvation and that we are not worthy to come into His presence.

In the confession of sins we humbly kneel as beggars, offering no good of ourselves but plead mercy, mercy, mercy that we be spared from the fate our sins deserve.

We stand in respect of His Gospel Word read. We stand to honor His name as we call upon it in prayer or sing the Trinitarian name in praise. We return to our knees in humble adoration as His presence is gifted us physically in His body and blood. We stand forgiven after the Supper and receive His peace declared in the benediction. Then we leave, esteeming Jesus for His grace and mercy and not ourselves because we have done nothing but receive His good gifts.

In all of this you have not done anything good—you aren't a good person because you've come to church. You being here rightly acknowledges the truth: horrible, sinful you, a person of unclean lips who dwells in the midst of an unclean people, have been called by the holy Christ to be His disciple. You cannot esteem yourself because you have done nothing good.

Everything of your salvation stands accomplished by Christ. In love, He delivers it all to you in via His Word and His sacraments in His church. Apart from Him you have done nothing and rank as nothing. He has claimed you unto Himself and His glory, which is all His and not yours, is where you now dwell forever.

Get over yourself and esteem your Savior.

Amen.