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The Greater Good - Acts 4:23-31

Earlier in Acts, just prior to our reading, Peter and John healed a man who was lame. They said it was not by their own piety or power, but that the faith that is through Jesus that healed him. They were also out preaching to the people that in Jesus there is resurrection of the dead. It was for doing these things that the religious authorities had them arrested. They were warned not to speak and act in the name of Jesus and then released.

Upon their release Peter and John return to their friends in the community of faith and they pray to the Sovereign Lord, the one who brought the world into being, and ask that he grant them the ability to speak with boldness. Clearly they valued the message they were proclaiming. They valued the gospel of Christ over their own safety. In such a situation one might be tempted to bargain with God, asking him to protect you since you are proclaiming his message. But the disciples' primary concern is for the message of Christ. They do pray for their own boldness. They are realistic about their finitude, but their concern is for God and not so much about themselves. And just as Peter and John gave all glory to God for the lame man who was healed, so also do they give glory to God by their willingness to give their very lives.

It wasn't always that way though. If you remember, in the gospels the disciples argued among themselves who was the greatest. They didn't even pray for Jesus when he asked them to at the Garden of Gethsemane. They went to sleep while he suffered the anticipation of his crucifixion. And they all scattered when Jesus actually was led to the cross. They did some good things in the gospels, but they were also preoccupied with other things. They wanted power. They wanted recognition. They didn't want to be involved in difficult situations or take any risks. And they didn't want to be identified with Christ when it entailed any suffering on their part. But look at them here in Acts. They aren't concerned about credit for themselves and they want to be loyal to God in the face of persecution.

Times are different now. Nowadays, at least in America, there is little in regards to religious persecution. We may be ignored, but we are not overtly persecuted. In fact with a few deist exceptions early in our country's history every president has wanted people to know that he was a person of faith (particularly while on the campaign trail). Yet the focus of our attention, what we consider important to orient our life around is always an issue at hand. And you can safely bet that the values of God will be at some variance with the values of our culture. Its not that the two are inherently opposite, there can be some overlap, but clearly there is a difference in priorities.

Last spring our youth went to Asheville to take part in the CBF ministry to the Slavic people. Among the things we did was to interact with some of their older youth and college age members. They talked about the persecution Christians often faced back in the Ukraine. However, one of them made an interesting comment. He said that while persecution was certainly difficult, it was almost easier to be faithful to God under those circumstances than when faced with the utter freedom that people have here in America. We can do what we want. We can go where we want. We can get much of what we want. And we do just that.

About a month ago, while doing some fall youth planning around our theme, "The Greater Good," Janet Wade called my attention to a book she was reading. The title of the book is The Narcissism Epidemic – Living in the Age of Entitlement (by Jean M. Twenge & W. Keith Campbell). The book talks about the spread of Narcissism in our culture. The epidemic began in the 70's with the idea of

stressing self-esteem, the idea that you are unique that you are special. But what gradually happened was that instead of fostering self-acceptance it engendered a sense of self-importance and a sense of entitlement. Instead of awakening people to the notion that they can make their own unique contribution to society it had the effect of people admiring themselves and their own self-expression. And the people that others began to look up to were not those who did something worthwhile, but those who admired themselves the most – for instance, Hollywood stars. And as Plato once said, “What’s honored in a country will be cultivated there.” Indeed it has.

By 2006 1 in 4 college students agreed with the majority of items on a standard measure of Narcissistic traits and 1 in 10 people in their 20’s has experienced some clinical symptoms of Narcissistic Personality Disorder. It turns out that Narcissism causes all of the things that the emphasis on self-esteem was hoping to prevent – aggression, materialism, lack of caring for others, and shallow values. In another 2006 poll 18-25 year olds were asked about the important goals of their generation. 81% said that becoming rich was important, 51% said becoming famous, and 10% said becoming more spiritual. Just so you know we are not alone, that same year British children were asked to name “the very best thing in the world.” The top answer was “being a celebrity,” followed by “good looks,” and then “being rich.” Of the options given for children to choose from “God” came in last on the list.

Both capitalizing on and encouraging these values is the modern media. Certainly advertising has helped the increase in material standards. Because as most any commercial will tell you, you deserve whatever it is that they are selling. Modern TV shows also contribute. You may not know all of these teen shows but first there was 90210, then the OC, and now Gossip Girl. Each show succeeded in making the teen and young adult characters richer and belonging to a more exclusive group than the previous one.

While America leads the way in all of this, to some degree narcissistic traits have become the norm in most of the Western World. Every culture is susceptible to it though. When I was in Zimbabwe some 13 years ago, I noticed that they only had 2 TV stations. What I also found out though was that the number 1 show in the country was The Fresh Prince of Bel Air, featuring a young African-American, Will Smith, living in a mansion out in California. And this from a culture where one pastor, preaching the glory of heaven to his congregation once said, “When you get to heaven you will get to live like missionaries.”

Another television craze that is sweeping our nation is reality TV – Survivor, My Super Sweet 16, The Bachelor, and American Idol are some examples. It’s called reality TV, but what it’s really about is an opportunity to become famous. In some cases the viewing audience gets to decide who will be famous. If they really wanted to do a reality show it would be something more along the lines of a family trying to scrape up enough money to pay the bills or send their kids to college.

2008 will long be remembered as the year when credit-fueled entitled dreams finally had to face reality - the housing market crashed and so did some of our banks. The boom in easy credit allowed people to pretend that they were better off than they were. People could show off their possessions while hiding their debt – at least for a while. If you go back to the early 1980’s people saved about 12% of their income, but now people under 35 spend 16% more than they make. Adjusted for inflation, kids in this past decade spend 5 times the amount their parents did. Once the keeping up with the Joneses principle goes into effect, it gradually permeates society.

In addition to fame and fortune there is also looks. Not so long ago plastic surgery was generally used for people who had congenital malformations or who suffered from burns. It used to be to help people look normal. Now it is used to make people look younger or better. The common ones are facelifts, botox, breast augmentation, and liposuction. You can even get plastic surgery for your pets. Perhaps your female dog needs a breast reduction after having puppies? Or, my favorite, for a male dog who

has been neutered, the insertion of neuticals. One reporter covering the story quipped, Are there any limits to cosmetic surgery or have we simply all gone nuts?”

Before we go condemning everyone under the age of 35, we should remember that young people didn't raise themselves. They got these values (at least collectively) from their parents and from media messages created by older people. Every generation lives in the cultural environment left to them by their predecessors. After the Columbine shooting in 1998, syndicated columnist William Raspberry said that our children are our canaries. What did he mean? Well when coalminers go deep into mines they would sometimes unknowingly go into a dangerous atmosphere, one filled with a poisonous gas such as methane. Some of them would become overcome by dangerous levels of methane and die. SO miners developed a warning system which would alert them to possible danger. They took canaries with them into the mines. When the birds, whose respiratory systems are more fragile than our's began to gasp for air, the miners knew it was time to get out. Well our more impressionable young folks are telling us something about the culture that has been left to them. The effects show up a little more.

As Tom Brokaw proclaimed there may have been a Greatest Generation, yet it became great by responding to the challenge of the Great Depression and the threat of World War II. Those life experiences collectively made them a more responsible community-oriented people. Yet none of them would have chosen to be a part of Great Depression and the threat of Hitler was ignored for years until the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor. While in no way do we wish to repeat the horrors of 9/11 in many respects it made us a better people. It reminded us of our common humanity and for a short while made us forget our superficial differences.

Nevertheless, self-absorption and a sense of entitlement are a part of our culture. And it is in this cultural milieu which we find ourselves as people of faith and as a church. And despite the fact that the thrust of most of the Bible is counter to self-preoccupation it is the religions that have aligned themselves with individualistic values that have thrived in recent years. Perhaps you have heard of Joel Osteen. He is the pastor of Lakewood Church in Houston, TX, the largest church in America. He has a book entitled Becoming a Better You. Some of the messages he emphasizes are God didn't create you to be average, you were made to excel, and to win is to honor God. He suggests that we should be bold in expressing our wants, as his son was when he received the new guitar he wanted and then immediately asked “When do you think I can get my new keyboard?”

I have to point out that boldly declaring your wants is a little different than the early disciples asking God to “grant your servants to speak your word with all boldness.” To be fair, the second half of Building a Better You advocates praising others, apologizing, and building better relationships. Looking at his message with a critical eye, I think he recognizes that on the whole we are now a sensitive, demanding group of people and we need to treat each other as such if we are going to live in relationship.

While our emphasis on faith might be different than Osteen's we as a church do need to be able to answer the question “what's in it for me?” I don't really like to say that but I think it's true for both members and visitors alike. The question probably won't asked out loud or even articulated in a person's mind, but it will be asked. Though perhaps for some long-time members the question may not come up because it already has an answer. They have been able to worship in a fulfilling way here for years. And they have long-standing relationships here with people who have been with them through thick and thin. But while meeting our own spiritual needs, we must become a place where others can readily see that their needs will be met, whether they come from a similar background or not. And many will not as 44% of all people now leave the denomination of their youth for another or none at all.

If the early church prayed to God for boldness in the face of persecution, what do we pray for now? Perhaps some creativity? Maybe a willingness to change? As much as I am reluctant to sound like Joel Osteen, I think part of the answer is simply to decide that we will succeed in reaching out to others and commit to finding the ways. We need to organize ourselves with this principle in mind and it needs to be a part of our collective thinking. If St. John's is to continue playing a part in the Kingdom of God for the long haul we will do that.

Yet, as a church, we serve God first. We need to see souls before we see potential members. Nobody will really listen to you unless they sense that you have some genuine degree of concern for them. If they sense that you care about them, then they are open to what you have to say. I will always remember an analogy by spiritual writer Donald Miller. He talks about the two conversations that go on simultaneously. The first one is on the surface. It could be about church, sports, politics, kids, work, school, whatever. But beneath the surface another conversation is taking place on the level of the heart. While you are talking to someone the heart is either saying "I like you" or "I don't like you." In our case it might be more along the lines of "I care about you as a person" or "I value you if might become a member." In our conversations it would be best if the mouth and heart were aligned in saying, "It's nice to meet you. We have some good things going on here at St. John's that we are excited about. We welcome you to be a part of them." Enthusiasm, after all, does mean "in God."

One of the things that I am excited about this fall is the number of people giving their time to work with the youth. It allows for more personal interaction and guidance. Carolyn and Stephen Allred will be working with the middle school youth while I work with the senior high on some nights. And on other nights youth will go their age and gender specific small groups where they can discuss the things that affect them with young adults such as Graham Claytor, Jason Benton, Brooks Fuller, Maddie Phillips, Elizabeth Peacock, Cathy McNish, and Lisa Cook. The goal is to meet them where they are and allow them to gain spiritual perspective in their lives in a safe environment. The goal of other youth group nights is to help youth identify their gifts and how they can contribute them to the youth group, St. John's, the community at large, and to God. We want our youth to know that they are important to us and our young adults to realize that their contributions make a difference. They do.

As we seek to go forward as a church let us remember the Apostle Paul who sought to be all things to all people for the sake of the gospel. Let us remember the sacrifices and boldness of John and Peter to spread the gospel. Let us remember that they failed and tried again, and that they both gave and received support from their faith community. If we truly believe Our Lord has something to offer to our community we will seek to share it. And if we value it enough, others will too.