



Good Shepherd Lutheran Church & School

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A Stephen Ministry Congregation

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Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost

August 27, 2017

“In God’s Presence All Must Tuck Their Tails”

(Rom. 12:3)

Rev. David K. Groth

“For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned” (Rom. 12:3).

**Every day, everywhere, by everyone...
sharing the grace of the Good Shepherd.**

Collect: Almighty God, whom to know is everlasting life, grant us to know Your son, Jesus, to be the way, the truth, and the life that we may boldly confess Him to be the Christ and steadfastly walk in the way that leads to life eternal; through the same Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen.**

Peter Gomes was the pastor of the campus chapel at Harvard University. He wrote a number of books and at times can be pretty critical of the population there at Harvard. He notes a link between knowledge and arrogance. As you might imagine, there are a lot of very smart people among the students and faculty, and they can also be pretty full of themselves.

Gomes, however, writes about one day at Harvard when nearly all that collective conceit was suspended, if only for a couple of hours. Nelson Mandela had come to Harvard to receive an honorary doctorate. You recall Mandela is credited in large part for helping put an end to South African apartheid in peaceful way. Gomes writes, “I watched all of us transformed: noisy, pushy, self-centered, conceited undergraduates and graduate students became quiet and calm, thinking absolutely about somebody else for a change; and my pompous, pushy, arrogant colleagues, all of whom are always fighting for every square inch of turf on that [stage], were overwhelmed by the magnitude of the person in our midst; and for a moment we were all changed. We all went back to what we were by six o’clock; that can’t be helped, but for an instant . . . it pleased me to realize that the young, raised on a diet of cheap and promiscuous celebrity, could at last recognize a [humble] hero when they were privileged to see one; and, unlike at commencement, when the unrestrained and competitive egos of the candidates for degrees turn the Yard into a barnyard, on Friday we were all as one, and our only thought and care was to share something of this great man. . . It was extraordinary, and

those of us who were there will never forget it” (Gomes, Strength for the Journey, p. 82).

The sin of arrogance: I submit it’s not just a problem at Harvard but can be a problem right here in Watertown, a problem for each of us.

Paul wrote to the Christians in Rome, “For by the grace given to me I say to everyone of you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment.” That is, there’s no room for arrogance or conceit in the Christian life.

It’s a theme Paul keeps coming back to. In Philippians 2, he writes, “Do nothing out of rivalry or conceit, but in humility count others better than yourselves” (v. 3). It’s not that everyone else is superior or more talented. Not at all. Rather, Christian love sees everyone else as worthy of being served. It’s the command, “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Lk. 10:27). Paul goes on to say, “Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped [or held on to], but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, and being found in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death – even death on a cross!” That’s the one we’re following! That’s the one we want to imitate: The one who humbled himself and became a servant to all.

The Bible is very consistent on the topic. The book of Proverbs especially has some surprisingly strong words to say about arrogance. From Proverbs 16: “Everyone who is arrogant in heart is an abomination to the LORD; be assured, he will not go unpunished” (v. 5). Apparently, the arrogance of man is diametrically opposed to the nature of God. Of course it goes back to Genesis 3, where Adam and Eve wanted to be esteemed as God is esteemed. But Jesus taught us to remove ourselves from the center of the world and put others first: “Whoever would be great among you” he said, “must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man came not

to be served but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many” (Mk 10:43-45).

The problem is arrogance and conceit have become standard fare in our culture, from little league baseball players all the way up to the White House. And I submit we’re pretty much ok with that. We’re far more concerned these days about bigotry than we are about arrogance, probably because bigotry is a sin that’s easy enough to pin on others while arrogance is a sin that’s a little harder to spot in ourselves, or at least easier to deny. But the truth is, as the descendents of Adam and Eve, we would deify ourselves if we could. Luther wrote, “This [forbidden] apple still lies heavy in everybody’s stomach, causes constant belching, and will not be digested. For even the true saints still have at least something of the core [of the apple] in their beliefs” (Plass, p. 1133). That is we can’t shake this desire to be like God.

We would consider arrogance to be a sort of minor sin, at least compared to murder, rape and the like. I think the main reason why God’s Word comes down so hard on arrogance is because it is God’s aim to save, and it’s very hard even for the Lord to save the one who is arrogant. The arrogant man is already full of himself; he has no room for grace. He cannot deflate himself enough to beg for grace. Only when we empty ourselves or are emptied of any other hope, only then is there room for God to give us his gifts of forgiveness and salvation.

Luther wrote, “In God’s presence all must tuck their tails and be glad that they can gain forgiveness. . . For if God does not forgive without stopping, we are lost” (LC III 90-91).

So this sin of arrogance isn’t so minor after all. In Mark 7, Jesus gives thirteen characteristics of those who are outside of God’s favor, with arrogance being considered right alongside sexual immorality and murder (v. 20ff). In Proverbs 6, of the seven things God hates, “haughty eyes” is the first one listed (v. 16). After all, those who commit murder often come to the point of deep grief and contrition

for their sin and therefore can readily be forgiven. But those who are arrogant and conceited often feel no real need for forgiveness.

This morning we have the pleasure of commissioning and installing a young man into the teaching ministry. We are truly blessed to have Stephen Bernau on our faculty. We often pray that God would raise up new pastors and teachers, and Stephen is an answer to that prayer. There aren't too many in Stephen's generation choosing to go into church work. In a few years it promises to be quite a problem. So we are blessed to have Stephen with us. His dad is a pastor and his mom is a teacher. Stephen is one of nine, most of them serving as pastors or teachers. But I know Stephen well enough to know it's not familial tradition that motivates him. He truly wants to serve in the name of Jesus. He truly wants to make a difference in the lives of God's people here. And he's going to be good at it.

But Stephen, the hard truth is there are some people (especially among adults) who are really difficult to teach, or to reach out to with the Gospel. Proverbs 26 says, "Do you see a man who is wise in his own eyes? There is more hope for a fool" (v. 12). Such people are not teachable. They heed no warnings. They're cocksure and confident already, in their own wisdom, their own strength, their own resources. What they don't know and what they will not accept is that they are as vulnerable as a little lamb in the middle of the forest. Therefore Proverbs 16 says, "Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall" (Prov. 16:18). Our psalm today says, "The LORD regards the lowly, but the haughty he knows from afar" (Ps. 138:6). It's not that the Lord is keeping his distance. It's that the haughty won't let him get any closer.

So you see while we dismiss arrogance as a peccadillo, as nothing too serious, the Bible takes it very seriously. Very bluntly, Luther wrote, "If you want to go to hell, then continue to be proud" (Plass, p. 1133).

Moreover, pride has a way of spoiling every gift God gives. Luther wrote, "If a young girl is pretty but becomes

proud and looks down on others, pride spoils her beauty” (Plass, 1136). How true! It works that way with every gift. I knew some music majors at the university, and I remember being so surprised and impressed and admittedly, a little envious. They were my own age. How did they get so good so young? But the moment that I sniffed a little arrogance is the same moment their music didn’t sound all that good anymore. Pride spoils every gift.

Paul deals with it head on: “If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing. Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant” (1 Cor. 13).

Finally, let’s think on Jesus . . . God’s Son, our Lord, Savior of the world. But one thing he was not was arrogant. If I had even the tiniest fraction of his wisdom, I’d need a dump truck just to haul around my ego! But think of it, you never see Jesus being arrogant or haughty. What we see is a certain humility, and he wasn’t just playing at it. He was truly humble, humble enough to surround himself with sinners and tax collectors. Humble enough to welcome the children. Humble enough to eat our lowly food, to laugh with us, walk dusty roads with us, grieve with us. Humble enough to take on our sin, as if it belonged to him and not us.

I mentioned Proverbs 16 earlier: “Everyone who is arrogant in heart is an abomination to the LORD.” God’s Son, Jesus, with our arrogance and sin on his shoulders, became an abomination to the LORD. At all other times, he’s God’s beloved Son. On the cross, he’s an abomination to the LORD. He willingly became detestable, despicable, repugnant, vile, abhorrent, and loathsome . . . not just to man but to the LORD.

God’s love for us is so great that he takes the filth of our sin on as his own. He is so humble in spirit that he

utterly debases himself. He says to you, “You’re no longer a sinner, I am. I’m putting myself in your place. You have not sinned; I have. You’re not an arrogant one. I am. All your sins are on me, not on you.” The devil will say the exact opposite. He’s the great accuser, so he will say to you, “You are no Christian. You are a terrible sinner, condemned to hell. I own you.” When the devil accuses you like that you tell him his argument is with Jesus now, who has washed you by his blood and declared you innocent and righteous.

Jesus still loves us, in spite of our pride. His death still counts for us, still wipes clean the record, still redeems us from sin and death. And his promises are still good, still valid. Where there is forgiveness of sins, there is life and salvation. Thanks be to God. Amen.

