

“Slumdogs and Millionaires at God’s Table”

Ephesians 3: 14-21

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*Ephesians 3:14-21*

*For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name. I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.*

*Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, for ever and ever. Amen.*

During the season of Lent, both in our small groups studies during the week, which you are welcome to be part of, as well as in our Sunday morning series, we are going to be exploring the topic of prayer. Now, that may not immediately sound like a very exciting topic, but as we discovered in one of our Bible studies this past week, when we begin to dig around the edges of “prayer,” we uncover some of the most fundamental questions of our faith. Who is this God that we pray to? What images or words do we use to imagine or identify this God? What should we pray about? How often should we pray? Who should pray? How do we pray when we are nervous that God may not answer our prayers or when we feel that God *has* not answered our prayers in the past? These are all important questions for us to wrestle with and ones that we will continue to address over this next five weeks.

For this morning, I believe that it might be important for us to start with even another question before all of these previous questions, namely, “Why *don’t* we pray? What is it that prevents us from praying? It has been my experience and the experience of many of my colleagues in ministry and in seminary, that once someone identifies themselves as going into “professional” ministry, the expectation is that he or she will be the one that prays at every family holiday meal. Somehow when I made the decision to go to seminary, it was no longer my father who prayed over the Thanksgiving turkey...now I was expected to do that.

Some of you are chuckling, but you know this is true for yourselves because whenever you attend a meeting here at the church, don't you also expect that the pastor in the room should pray? We have this idea, somehow, that praying is the job of the professional. As Presbyterians, we proclaim a belief in the "priesthood of all believers," which is our way of saying that we are all called to ministry in the community of faith. If that's true, then wouldn't we hope that prayer would be a fundamental part of each of our journeys of faith?

We might also be hesitant to pray at times because we worry that either God won't answer our prayers or perhaps, more painfully, we have had the experience in our own lives or in the lives of those we love that God has not answered our prayers; at least not in the way we hoped. We look out at a world filled with brokenness and evil and wonder how is it that we can pray to God who is supposed to be good and all powerful in this sort of a world? This is another important question that we will wrestle with in the weeks ahead.

This morning I want to explore a third possible reason concerning why it is we might not pray—beginning with an examination within. Let me begin by stating my hypothesis as simply as possible: if we look deeply and honestly within ourselves, we will see things we don't like—parts of ourselves, tendencies in ourselves, the capacity within ourselves to do things that we are just not comfortable with, to have thoughts that we would rather not think. If we hold that truth alongside the truth that God is omniscient (the fancy word we use for "all-knowing") then God knows all of these things about ourselves that we would rather not believe are true. So, it's perhaps not surprising that we would be hesitant to be in relationship with that God, or to even be in conversation with that God who knows us so deeply, a God who may in fact hold up a mirror to ourselves that we are not comfortable looking into. No one wants to be reminded of their worst selves! I think that this is an important concern for us to consider in our life of faith and in our practice of prayer.

This idea about one's 'worst self' is one that I first began to wrestle with in an unusual time and place in my life. I was a college student when a master class was held at my university. As some of you know, I was studying to be a music director; I wanted to direct band and choir and had expected to do that for a number of years going on to eventually conduct symphony orchestra; imagining, really, someday that I would conduct the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. Well, at least I made it to Chicago...but they haven't called. I went to a master class given by a professor named Weston Noble. He was then and has been for our generation

one of the pre-eminent choral conductors of our time. At the master class he taught about conducting technique and how to get the best out of singers and lots of other things and in the end he took time for questions and answers. Feeling a little bit clever, I confess, I went to the microphone and asked, “Professor Noble, what is it that separates a good conductor from a great conductor?”

I expected him to give an answer like, “Practice, boy, practice!” or maybe to talk about what school one should study at or a particular school of thought or technique or someone that I might model myself after. Instead, he gave a rather peculiar answer. He paused and said, “You know, I suppose the difference between a good and a great conductor—what makes a great conductor—is not so different from what allows us to be great at anything in our lives. Each of us has a dark side, a shadow side, and if we deny it or ignore it, it will forever haunt us and prevent us from ever being able to be great at anything. But, if we acknowledge it, if we are in dialogue with our dark side, if we become friends with it, then we are freed from it. We are free to become great; a great conductor or great at anything in life that you want to be.”

“WHAT?” I thought. Talk to your dark side? Who are you? Yoda? (He kind of looked like Yoda, actually.) I thought that this was a rather strange idea, but in the months and years that followed I realized that there was a considerable wisdom in the words that he had shared that day because they rang true. I began to think that this Weston Noble was kind of a genius. Then I discovered, I’m a little embarrassed to say, that he was not the first to come up with this idea. In fact this idea about our dark side, our shadow side, has been around for a long, long time; particularly this idea about understanding it, about knowing it.

As I’ve been reading and writing about this the past couple of weeks I’ve come across a number of authors, scholars, philosophers and psychologists who have been doing some writing about this over the last century. Their words begin to get at the core of what I think is important for us this morning. Here are a couple of examples:

From the psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (who used to be at the University of Chicago and is now in Los Angeles at Claremont) who wrote in his seminal work, *Finding Flow*:

“When asked what has been the most difficult obstacle to overcome in his career, the novelist Richard Stern answered, “I think it’s that rubbishy part of myself, that part which is described by such words as vanity, pride, the sense of not being treated as I should be,

comparison with others, and so on. I've tried rather hard to discipline that...I would say that the chief obstacle is – oneself...Of course there are things in myself...which I know are bad, mean, twisted, weak, this, that, or the other thing. I can draw strength from that...I can transform them. They're sources of strength.”

Csikszentmihalyi goes on to say that: “one need not be an artist to transform the ‘rubbishy parts’ of the self into a deeper understanding of the human condition. We all have the opportunity to use ambition, the need to be loved – even aggressiveness – in constructive ways, without being carried away by them. Once we realize what our demons are, we need not fear them any longer. Instead of taking them seriously, we can smile with compassion at the arrogance of these fruits of our imagination.”

More recently, from a specifically Christian perspective, the evangelical Presbyterian pastor, Leighton Ford, wrote a book on Christian leadership (which I think applies to all of us in the call we each have to ministry). Leighton Ford writes:

“Every leader has a ‘shadow’ side, like the dark side of the moon – areas that are disguised or perhaps explored but unrecognized. I am convinced that our leadership [I insert here “our ministry” as it applies to all of us] will be stronger and the dangers of collapse lesser if we become aware of these dark areas and bring them into the light early.”

A fuller treatment is given by Ruben Habito, a Filipino Buddhist professor at Southern Methodist University who teaches on Buddhist and Christian practices and relations. This is what Ruben writes:

“Each of us has a “dark side,” inhabited by what Carl Jung called the “shadow,” a force derived from our common heritage of being human. Each of us has a wonderful capacity for creativity, love, cooperation, kindness, living peacefully with others, and a desire for godliness. We relish such qualities and want others to think of us as the embodiment of such traits. But we also have this “dark side,” wherein resides such attributes as anger, laziness, dishonesty, bigotry, a willingness to kill or use other form of violence against others, and other tendencies that our conscious mind rejects.

The bipolar nature of our existence as presented by depth psychology is dramatically portrayed in the story of Dr. Jekyll and Mr.

Hyde, where the good and evil sides of the same person find themselves acting on different planes unknown to each other, manifesting what is known as a split personality. The unrecognized shadow can continue to remain active and undermine the very status of the good and bride side. WE see how such a state of affairs can actually exist in cases where outwardly respected persons come to be revealed as having skeletons hidden in the closet of their personal lives.

Further, we also see how persons deemed to be good and upright citizens or church members, acting as the conscience of the community, can also be the most vindictive, the most judgmental, the most cruel toward those who are perceived as falling short of their moral standards. Such vindictiveness, judgmental stances, and cruelty, depth psychologists would point out, are the outcome of their vigorous efforts to deny the shadow side of their own existence, and this denial projects itself in their attitude toward those they associate with that shadow. “Scapegoating” – laying the blame on some identifiable culprit, whether it be an individual or group or type – is one mechanism arising from the way we humans deal with our shadow side.

The recognition of and reconciliation with our shadow is a crucial element in our healing. Recognition and reconciliation involve first being able to see that there is a shadow side of our very being and then being able to accept it as part of ourselves. Only in the recognition and acceptance of our shadow side can we become whole, integrated, reconciled, and therefore truly and fully ourselves.

The healing message of the gospel can also be expressed in the phrase, “The glory of God is the whole human being fully alive.” The whole human being fully alive is to be understood as one who has integrated the light and the shadow sides of one’s being and thus come to salvation, to wholeness, and to holiness.”

This morning, I think these ideas are important for us to consider because we too often want to deny or ignore the shadow sides of ourselves, rather than, as Professor Nobel suggested: be in dialogue with it, be aware of it. Or, to admittedly misappropriate terms from pop culture, to acknowledge both the slumdog and the millionaire within us all. It is only when we begin to do this, begin to honestly explore and accept that side of ourselves that we do not like, that God can then begin to work on it as well—chipping away at it, healing it, reconciling it. It is in

this way that prayer and our shadow side may have a symbiotic relationship that flows in both directions. First, when we are courageous enough to take a step out and enter into a state of prayer—of meditation, whether comfortable or not, then we provide some space, some silence to more accurately reflect on who we are and to allow God to reveal to us more about who we are. That *recognition* of the shadow side then opens up the beginning of *reconciliation* with ourselves and then with God. In moving towards reconciliation, we may, secondly, be more open to prayer and that relationship with God that knows us so well. So the circle continues; the circle of the symbiotic relationship between prayer and our shadow side.

Perhaps, just as importantly, this leads to something else that I think is important. For when we are able to recognize and acknowledge our shadow, then we may be better able to stop projecting our shadow side onto others—looking down on them instead of being honest with ourselves. Further, we are better enabled to admit that we have damaged other people, broken relationships with other people, even royally messed things up. We are able to, with humility, acknowledge and recognize our shadow side that caused this brokenness and then begin the first fragile, courageous steps of seeking reconciliation with others. Here again there may be a symbiotic relationship between our reconciliation with others, with ourselves and with our God.

Finally, I recognize that there is a big risk here. There is a risk because in our human relationships with one another we have had experiences in life where we wondered, “if people really knew me, would they still love me?” Even with our partners, those that we spend our lives with, isn’t there sometimes that nervousness, wondering if he or she knew this about me, would they still love me? What if they knew this even darker thing, would they still love me? What if they knew *all* of me, how could they possibly still love me then? It would be fair to ask the same question of God. If God were to fully know us, could God still love us? How could that be?

This brings us back to our scripture from Ephesians this morning, for Paul reminds the church in Ephesus and the church everywhere that we are being “rooted and grounded in love.” “Rooted” is an agricultural image referring to roots that are the foundation of and the beginning of growth. “Grounded,” is more of an architectural image referring to a strong base upon which we can build solid, tall, broad, “holistic” lives. God’s love gives us these kinds of roots and grounding. How can that love be so strong? Paul says that we are to know the love of Christ

that surpasses knowledge, so even when it does not make sense (from our own experience) that God could love us that much, that's okay because Christ's love surpasses that knowledge. As Paul concludes this prayer he goes on to say even more strongly that the love of Christ is able to do abundantly far more than all that we can ask or *even imagine*. If you cannot imagine that Christ could love all of you, that is okay because Christ works beyond our imagination, too

This morning we gather once again at the table, for communion, as we do the first Sunday of every month. As we come, I encourage you to remember that God invites us to this table, not because we are worthy, but because we are hungry. Therefore I invite not only each of you to come, but for each of you to bring your *whole selves* before God; the slumdog in you and the millionaire; your light and your dark sides, your beams and your shadows. Bring your whole self to the table because God has invited you, God knows you and God loves you still.

Amen.