

7 Pentecost, Proper 10

July 15, 2018

Rev. Ken Wratten at St. Luke's

Amos 7:7-15

Amos claimed to be a herdsman, a dresser of sycamore trees. He prophesied to exercise the gift and the job God had given him.

Ephesians 1:3-14

We were chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world.

Mark 6:14-29

King Herod beheads John the Baptist

The Scriptures show us a study in managing self-esteem. We see HUMILITY in Amos, who claimed only to be a herdsman, and a tree-trimmer. But he also claimed the power of God working through him to speak the truth to Israel. Then we see the strong PRIDE that motivated Herod to execute John the Baptist. To think more highly of ourselves that we ought to is PRIDE. And so we are taught to show humility.

I struggled with these concepts of pride and humility for a long time in my life. I was told by my father to never claim that I was good at anything, because that was bragging; and bragging was prideful, arrogant, and self-centered. I took that order from my dad to mean that if I even thought I was good at something, I was bragging, and that was wrong. This understanding was not just something I carried with me as a young boy, but even into my work life. For years I was very careful to never tell my manager, or my co-workers, or to go home and tell my family, about the good work I thought I had accomplished. It was my job to work hard, be quiet, and hope they would notice – and surprise me by making me president of the company. I learned through the next frustrating and disappointing decade that this is NOT how the workplace operates. My father's attempt to keep me from being prideful left me with no self-esteem. I don't imagine I am alone in this. We reject ALL pride and end up with no self-esteem. So how do we look at this issue of PRIDE from the perspective of being Christians? What can we learn from today's lessons?

Jesus was sentenced to death by Pilate; even after Pilate had stated that he found no reason to execute Jesus. He washed his hands of the judgment the crowd was asking for. But in the end, his high self-esteem got the best of him. The crowd pressured Pilate to executing Jesus, and he agreed, simply to pacify them. Pilate was motivated to protect his ego.

John was sentenced to death by Herod; even though Herod respected John. He knew that John was a good and holy man. He had been protecting John. He liked to listen to John. (6:20). But in the end, his high self-esteem got the best of him. His niece, his wife, and his guests pressured Herod into executing John, rather than to break his promise to Herodias; a promise that did not even make sense. He offered her half of his kingdom. He ruled over the Jews only by the authority given to him by Rome. He had no kingdom to give.

Consider for a minute John the Baptist. His sermons were bold; they challenged people to examine themselves. He had attacked Herod for his marriage to his

brother's wife; a marriage strictly forbidden by Jewish law. John had been absolutely sure of his role as prophet, and proud of the assignment God had given him. But he was also ready to humbly submit to the greater message Jesus was bringing. He instructed his own followers to follow Jesus instead. John's pride was based in confidence that he was using God's gifts to do God's work. I think this is the key to holding a healthy form of pride: Are you and I proud of the gifts God has given us; and are we proud of our use of those gifts?

Earlier I said that to think more highly of ourselves that we ought to is pride. But to think less of ourselves than we ought to is wasting God's gifts. It is a failure to use the unique set of skills and talents that God gives each of us; gifts that when they are combined with other gifts belonging to the body of Christ, can bring blessings to others. 1 Peter 4:10, "God has given gifts to each of you... Manage them well so that God's generosity can flow through you."

My brothers and I were taught from an early age that ANY self-esteem was arrogance; it was false pride; it was wrong. It took 30 years for us to learn that some forms of pride are healthy and important.

Paul wrote in 2 Cor 5:11-13, "Are we trying to pat ourselves on the back again? No... it is to bring glory to God." Paul is teaching that if we are to have pride in anything at all, we should take pride in what God has done for us; what situations and skills God has given us; and what we have done with God's gifts.

You and I have accomplished so many exciting things in this place over the last year and a half! It would be so easy for us to take personal pride in the improvements we have made, the ministries we have grown, the impact we have made literally around the world from this rock-solid group of faithful Christians. But as Mark stressed last week when Jesus sent out the disciples two by two, they went out representing Jesus – not themselves. They went out preaching God – not boasting about their own gifts of healing.

We need to avoid false humility that wastes God's gifts and limits our living out the life God has planned for us.

Our Christian values direct us to examine our own self-esteem and keep a healthy balance of humility and pride;

Humility knowing that God is God – and we are not.

Pride – knowing God chose you and me before the foundation of the world to use us; to transform other people's lives.

When our pride is in God, forgiveness happens; grace happens; love happens; and miracles happen!!

Amen.