

"YOU'RE A GOOD KID!"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church
106 East 86th Street
New York, New York 10028
January 13, 1991

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INTRODUCTION

Harriett Beecher Stowe was a most successful writer. She achieved her first triumph as an author at the wonderful age of 12. She was a student at Litchfield Academy and along with the other Litchfield students, she was required to submit an essay at the end of the term. Her essay was awarded first prize by the unanimous vote of the judges and was one of two read at the Graduation Exercises by the school's Headmaster. And so outstanding was her paper, that the audience applauded when it was read.

When it was revealed that Harriett Beecher was the author of this paper, her father, Lyman, Pastor of the local Church, smiled proudly. And the smile of her proud father was a reward that Harriett Beecher cherished as long as she lived. Said her biographer,

"Neither the honors nor the success she won in later life meant as much to her as her father's smile that day, and, in effect - her career was determined!"

A father's smile. Or, a mother's nod of approval. Oh, it can be quite powerful! Deep within the heart of every young person is the need to have a father or a mother say, "Well done. I'm so proud of you. You're a good kid!"

THE NEED TO FEEL ACCEPTED

The deepest need every young person has is the need to feel accepted, loved, wanted and appreciated.

In our Lesson for today, Mark is telling us that at the baptism of Jesus, He heard the voice of God saying to Him, "You are My beloved Son with whom I am well pleased!" What a marvelous affirmation. Remember Luke's comments about the younger years of Jesus..."He grew in wisdom and stature and in favor with God and man."

I wonder if Mary, His mother, ever said to Jesus...."Jesus...you're a bad boy!" I doubt it, don't you? I'm not saying that Jesus did not have a normal childhood. But what I am saying is there were some things Mary believed about Jesus as He was growing up. She knew, I think, that He was a special child. He might be mischievous; He might be rowdy, but He could never be bad. And I wish that every mother and father could believe that about their child.

We're all familiar with the term of self-fulfilling prophecy. It means that we tend to conform to the image we have of ourselves. If we see ourselves as clumsy, we will act clumsy. If we see ourselves as intelligent, we will generally act with some degree of intelligence. And if we see ourselves as bad - unacceptable, unloveable and unworthy - that is how we will behave.

In his book, Mistreated!, Ron Lee Dunn tells about two altar boys. One was born in 1892 in Eastern Europe. The other was born just three years later in a small mid-western town. Though they lived very separate lives in very different parts of the world, these two altar boys had almost identical experiences. Each boy was given the opportunity to assist his parish priest in the Service of Holy Communion. Ironically, each boy, while handling the communion cup, accidentally spilled some of the wine on the carpet. Not just a drop, but enough to really leave a mark on the carpet. But there the similarities end. But not the story... there's more.

The priest in the Eastern European Church, seeing the purple stain on the carpet, slapped the little altar boy hard across the face and shouted, "You clumsy kid...leave the altar!" That little boy grew up to become an atheist and a Communist. He was the "strongman dictator" of Yugoslavia from 1943 to 1980. His name was Josip Broz Tito.

The priest in the church in Illinois, upon seeing the stain near the altar, knelt down to the little boy's level, looked him tenderly in the eyes and said,

"It's all right, son. You'll do better next time. Someday you'll be a fine priest for God. It's all right..."

That little boy grew up to become the much-loved Bishop Fulton J. Sheen. Two young boys. Two similar experiences with radically different endings. We all have the deep need to feel loved, accepted, affirmed and appreciated.

WE BECOME WHAT OTHERS TELL US WE WILL BECOME

This brings us to the second thing to be said: we become what others tell us we will become. Tell a child that he or she is a good child, praise him for his positive acts, tell her that she is pretty and that you are proud of her, and he or she will live up to that positive self-image.

Pablo Picasso once said rather immodestly,

"When I was a child, my mother said to me, 'If you become a soldier, you'll be a general. If you become a monk, you'll end up as the Pope'. Instead I became a painter and wound up as Picasso."

Whether you appreciate Picasso's art or not, you will have to admit he had a wise mother. We become what people tell us we will become. If people prophesy success for us then success is probably what we will attain.

There was once a very lonely and sad young man named Arthur Schopenhauer who lived from 1788 to 1860. When Arthur was a boy, his father died by drowning. His mother, something of an advocate of free love, virtually abandoned him. Schopenhauer grew to young manhood groping for an understanding of life.

Once when he thought he was alone he bent over a rose and began speaking lovingly to the flower. A gardener came by and said in all earnestness, "Who are you?" Schopenhauer replied,

"Ah...if you could tell me that, you would be the greatest philosopher in all the world."

And having said this he realized that if he could answer the question, "Who am I?" that he would also be the greatest of all philosophers. How could he discover himself and realize his potentials?

One day after his mother had settled down, he visited her. She was having a party. A group of children, catching sight of Schopenhauer's serious, brooding face, laughed at him. Hurt by the attitude of the children, he walked mournfully away and stood at a window gazing out despondently. The taunts of the young people were suddenly cut short by a deep German voice saying,

"Children....don't laugh at this young man...in time he will surpass us all!"

Schopenhauer turned and met the thoughtful gaze of the speaker, a man named Goethe, proclaimed as the greatest genius of the 18th Century. The words rang through Schopenhauer's mind, "He will surpass us all.". It had been a chance encounter...but the sad, despondent young philosopher never forgot it. Though he never let it be known, Goethe became his inspiration and idol. He did gain recognition as a philosopher of extraordinary ability and when he died he chose to do so seated in a chair beneath the picture of the German poet who had meant so much to him, who one day saw him as he could be!

We all need somebody who believes in us - somebody who sees us as we could be. We all need to be loved, accepted, affirmed, appreciated. We become what "significant others" tell us we will become. And this brings us to the final point.

SEPARATE DEEDS FROM WORTH AS HUMAN BEINGS

In order for children to feel good about themselves, parents need to learn to separate their children's deeds from their worth as human beings.

It's not easy being a parent. A mother of three unruly preschoolers was asked whether she'd have children if she had to do it all over again. "Sure" she responded...."but not the same ones!"

A famous pediatrician was asked by a mother what the best time was to put her children to bed. Her answer, "While you still have the strength".

It is not easy being a parent, but perhaps the most difficult part of all is separating a child's actions from his value as a person. It is one thing to say, "Tommy....you have done a BAD thing". It is quite another to say, "Tommy, you are a BAD boy". A child breaks a dish. Mother comes running with a deep scowl on her face. "Naughty girl" she says loudly. "Shame on you". A few moments later the child is tugging on Mommy's dress. She's looking up into Mommy's face. What she wants to know is,

"Am I still loved? I have done something I shouldn't have done. Am I still a person worthy of my mother's love?"

And a wise mother or father will take the child up into their arms and offer comfort and reassurance at this point.

Here we take our cue from Jesus. For this is what the Cross is all about. Because of what Christ has done, our acceptability is separated from our sinful actions. What else does it mean that our sins have all been washed away, that all is forgiven?

It has often been noted that Jesus never called people sinners. The woman was not an adulteress. She was a person of worth who had committed an adulterous act. The man who stole is not a thief, but rather a person of worth who has committed a grievous crime. When we say that God loves the sinner, but not the sin, we are stating the most "foundational" truth about the meaning of agape love. It is a truth we need to apply to our lives as families. Try to separate the action - the deed - from the person.

AND ONE LAST WORD

And one last word to add to this and carry out from here with us. Some of us are not parents. There is no one for whom we are responsible to bolster their self-esteem. No, we are not all parents, but we are all children. And some of us bear scars from our own upbringing.

I once read that Arturo Toscanini, as a child, never knew whether or not his mother loved him. When he grew up and received the acclaim of vast audiences everywhere, he still felt this gnawing emptiness, this chasm in his soul. He could never be sure that his success brought any joy or comfort to his mother's heart.

In Faye Walden's book, Female Friends, one woman expresses relief that her mother has died, saying that now there is one less pair of eyes to judge her!

That's hard and maybe that is your experience. I hope not. Perhaps there were "significant others" who somehow communicated to you once upon a time that you were stupid, ugly and unacceptable and thus you have felt unloved.

Or, perhaps you have let yourself down. There was that occasion or perhaps several occasions when you fell into a grievous sin. You are coping with guilt, with the fear of discovery, or the regret of having hurt people you love. And now you are sorry. You cannot change the past, but hopefully you are seeking to change the future. The past still haunts you, however.

If that is where you are then I want you to look into the eyes of a man who hangs on a cross - to look deep into those eyes that are filled with forgiveness, renewal and love. Eyes that see you - yes, but not your sin. It makes a difference whether you once told a lie or that you are a liar. It makes a difference whether you once broke your marriage vows or you are an adulterer. It makes a difference whether you once cheated on your taxes or that you are a cheat. Unfortunately, there are some people who continue their behavior until they actually become a liar, a cheat, or an adulterer. But, it doesn't have to be that way. There is hope and there is room for all of us at the foot of the cross. The man on the cross is able to separate our worth as a child of God from our bad deeds.

CLOSING

A little child broke a vase that was a cherished heirloom. Because she knew its value, the child cried out when she broke it. Her mother came running. The child was surprised to see not anger but relief on her mother's face.

"I thought you were hurt" her mother said, taking her up in her arms.

Looking back on that event in years to come, she said, "I discovered that day that I was the family treasure". And would that every child would grow up with that kind of feeling. "I am the family treasure".

We all need to feel loved, accepted, valued. We have a tendency to become what people will tell us we will become. The wise parent separates a child's actions from his or her value as a person. Fortunately, this is how God values us. He is able to separate us from our sin, our wrongdoing. Thus He can cleanse us and help us start anew. And what better time to do this than now, here....

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PRAYER

Make us sensitive to Your presence and Your nearness in these moments, O God...remind each of us that our lives are precious in your sight...that we are your children...loved, accepted...forgiven and restlred. Dismiss us now with Your blessing and send us out of here with a a song in our hearts. In the name and spirit of Christ, our Lord. Amen.