

Psalm 111 Isaiah 57:13b-19 Romans 6:3-11 St. Matthew 5:20-26

The Higher Way

In his commentary on our Old Testament passage for this sixth Sunday after Trinity, Professor Jan Ridderbos wrote: “A high God and a lowly people go together well because only a lowly people acknowledge His highness.” Think about that comment for a moment will you? “A high God and a lowly people go together well because only a lowly people acknowledge His highness.” Phillips Brooks said the same thing in a slightly different way. He said, “The true way to be humble is not to stoop until you are smaller than yourself, but to stand at your real height against some higher nature that will show you what the real smallness of your greatness is.” These statements make perfect sense to us, don’t they? And yet, even though the idea behind the statements is fairly simple and straightforward and perfectly comprehensible, it is surely one of the most difficult ideas when it comes to practical application.

The religious leaders of Isaiah’s day had certainly missed the boat when it came to living in the light of God’s greatness. In the previous chapter, chapter 56, the Lord describes them as “shepherds who cannot understand; they all look to their own way, every one for his own gain, from his own territory. ‘Come,’ one says, ‘ I will bring wine, and we will fill ourselves with intoxicating drink; Tomorrow will be as today, and much more abundant.’” The key word here is, of course, the word ‘own’ – their own way, their own gain, their own territory. You see, the highness of God is totally obliterated when we focus our attention on that which is thought to be our own.

But when we relinquish that which we see as our own, whether it be our own strength, our own intellect, our own resources, our own abilities, our own dreams, ambitions or goals, and we submit ourselves to Him Who is above all things, beyond all things, greater

than all things, and Who, indeed, owns all things, then we move from the lower path of human finiteness to the higher path of Divine infiniteness.

But that is the essence of the Christian Faith, isn't it? The appropriate response to the revelation of His greatness in the light of our smallness is an acknowledgment of our own limitations plus an ever-increasing trust and reliance on Him because of His lack of limitations. And that trust and reliance increases as we continue to walk in the newness of the life He has given us. Indeed, the Christian Faith is a process...a race, if you will, based from start to finish upon our God's greatness. We were dead in our trespasses and sins...you don't get much lower than that, do you now? And just as the Israelites were slaves in Egypt...just as they were captives in Babylon...so we too were slaves to sin and captives to satan. If it wasn't for His greatness, none of us would ever had entered the race in the first place much less finished it!

So, it is always sad to see those who, like us, are very small indeed (even at their real height)...it is sad to see them actually live as if they have no comprehension of how finite they really are. It is sad because it displays a different message than the message we read in the Scriptures. It conveys the idea that we have some greatness in us after all...and that God is not as great as He claims to be...that we can make it on our own...that we can rely on our own strength...our own abilities and so on. And pretty soon, that's where our focus lies...on us, not on Him. And God is no longer evident in our lives at all. It is then all about us...our abilities and our things. That's why Jesus warned us not to be like those of the world who try to lord it over others...those who always want other to know that they are in charge...Indeed, those whom Jesus esteems as great in His Kingdom are to be servants or slaves of all...because that way, the world will not see us, but Him.

This was the problem with the Pharisees Jesus mentioned in our Gospel lesson for today. It wasn't that they were bad people. Many of them were very sincere. Many of them

worked very hard at keeping God's law and making more laws to make sure they didn't break any of the other laws. But their focus was inward, not upward. They relied on their own perceived goodness...and God got lost in the mad political scuffle of one-upmanship as one Prima Donna tried to outdo and outshine the other...as each one strove to exceed the others in self-righteousness...and the sad thing is, very few of them actually were consciously aware of God's absence in their lives.

For this reason, Jesus calls us to walk the higher way with Him, not the lower way with those who think they are high while they are not. The measure of our righteousness must never be our own or even that of the most godly fellow fallen friend we know. No, our righteousness only exceeds the righteousness of others when it is the righteousness of Christ we are standing in...the righteousness we received from Him when He raised us from our deadness...our slavery...our captivity into the heavenly places to be seated with Him there and to walk the higher way with Him and in Him and through Him. Because it is only in recognizing our own lowliness that we will ever be able to acknowledge His Highness.

So, dearest brethren, as you come into the throne-room of His Highness, the King of Creation Himself, stand at your real height against His higher nature and beg Him to show you the real smallness of your greatness. Because the more you see of your smallness, the more you will see of His highness.