

You can blame this sermon on a rotund man in a white T-shirt and Julia Rendon.

I was biking a couple of weeks ago and I encountered this guy walking toward me. He wore that face some men in their 50s put on: that dour, grouchy expression intended to scare dogs, babies, and anyone else. The kind of face that wants to scare you so you won't know how scared *he* is. He was dressed in a white T shirt with the University of Iowa Hawkeye logo adorning his belly, and just above it was inscribed the word *pride*. Coincidentally, the next day Julia told me that it was ok to deviate from the official lectionary over the summer. Knowing that I had a hall pass on the UCC lectionary, I chose my own scriptures.

That found me thinking about the guy's "Iowa Pride" T shirt and the word *pride* in general, especially what the Bible has to say about *pride*. As you've heard from today's lectionary, The Scriptures are not a fan. So, I decided to preach on *pride*. It's weird we folks of the Western World and the Christian tradition have an affinity for pride, that we're *proud* of *pride*. If you were driving into Indianola on highway 92 and saw a sign that said, "Indianola, Proud Home of Simpson College," you'd likely think nothing of it. (Of course, if it said, "Indianola, Proud Home of the Indianola Indians," we might take exception, but it would be the use of the label *Indians* that would draw our concern, not *pride*.) On the dozen or so of RAGBRAI rides I've made across this state, countless communities and organizations have proclaimed pride, as if this is a civic good. I'm not sure it is.

Imagine instead, you're approaching Norwalk and see a sign claiming that Norwalk is *grateful* community or a *humble* one. You'd be taken aback, but once you got used to it, the idea of a humble or grateful community might seem enticing, even comforting. This place called Norwalk might be a town where folks are just folks and welcome to meet you as such. The local Rotary clubs and high schools might need to do some brainshifting, but I'm not sure that would be a bad thing at all. It would certainly seem consistent with what God calls us to be.

Thus far, I've ducked the idea of Gay Pride and Black Pride. To be honest, when the topic of this sermon first popped to mind, those concepts didn't cross my mind until after I gave Julia the word for the day—*Pride*. Blame it on my heterosexual, Caucasian myopia. I'll freely admit that's part of it. Still, as I thought about the use of the word *Pride* in that context, I think it comes from some place very different than puffed-chest hubris of community leaders and school boards. Pride means something very different when it references a mindset of **oppressed** people.

In that context, *pride* refers to a reaction *to*, a denial *of*, a *shame heaped* upon folks by the larger population because those folks are different from the

norm. African Americans were taught for centuries to be ashamed of the beautiful skin that is their birthright. Gay folks have lived millennia fearing ridicule, punishment, death or physical dismemberment for seeking, or even feeling, love and connection with other folks born like them.

To rally against that shame and claim themselves as the beautiful, God-shaped beings that they are, folks rallied to the call of *pride*, in other words being *pleased, accepting, comfortable, and unselfconscious of who God made them to be*. They used the term *Pride* to **name** that God-given, God-driven gift of an identity without shame. That use of *Pride* is a whole different thing than the *narcissistic hubris* the scriptures are railing against. In the New Testament, James calls the opposite of that kind of pride *Grace*; and First Corinthians calls for *love, patience and acceptance*. When a gay man or woman talks about being proud of who they are, they are embracing that kind of graceful, inclusive lovingkindness.

The scriptures, on the other hand, rail against a pride that is exclusive and hieratic. Minority groups claiming the term are expressing inclusiveness and community. That's why the term *White Pride* is so off-putting to a spiritually inclined ear. People my color are granted the status of normalcy merely by an accident of pigment. Heterosexual men like me have not needed fear letting their sexual orientation be known; indeed, we've gotten away with way too much under the guise of just being a guy. We haven't had to fight against a malestream of loathing and injustice.

I mentioned school pride a bit ago. Let's go back there. I've taught in three high schools and served in a professional role in probably another fifty. Rarely did I walk through a school that I did not see a sign mentioning school pride. On some occasions I'd witness a pep rally or some such urging the student body to take pride in their school. On rarer occasions I might see a teacher chatting up a student and telling the kid to "show some pride in yourself."

Here *Pride* is being used in these situations as a *control mechanism*, a means of manipulation. Think what would be different if someone substituted the term *honor*. That puts the school in a more wholistic light. School pride? *You-betch-ya, boss*, and the kid goes skipping along. Tell the kid to *honor* their school, and they might give it a thought if only for the novelty of it. What's to honor? If they think about it long enough, they might come up with an answer that goes far beyond the football team.

Same with the kid being scolded! Tell them to shape up and honor themselves, and it focuses them on what's *positive* about themselves, not what seems like it's on the outside like self-pride. Self-pride is the kind of idea that sells sweat shirts with school logos, not an intrinsic sense of self.

Let's talk about pride's diminutive cousin, *self-esteem*. I'm going to cheat some and draw on adolescent psychology, something I taught for many years. We in the western world are steeped in the idea that we should develop self-esteem, especially our children's self-esteem. There's a problem with this. High levels of *unreferenced* self-esteem *do not* correlate with pro-social behavior. Many youth in juvenile detention centers *do not* suffer from *low* self-esteem. The *opposite* tends to be the case among the more violent offenders. That inflated self-esteem professionals call *narcissism*, a term we all learned once Trump was President, if we didn't know it before.

Let's be clear, I am **not** talking about *self-worth*! *Self-worth* is a marvelous thing because it's *referenced*; it has *evidence*. You want to help someone be happy and successful. Nurture their self-worth. Give them demanding but doable, worthwhile tasks. For example, take that juvenile offender and give them some authentic responsibility for something *they think* is valuable, maybe repairing a vehicle, maybe tending a garden, maybe caring for an infirm relative. With proper support, their self-worth will bloom and their anti-social behaviors will decrease.

You see, pride screws up our priorities. Seeking pride makes us focus on the superficial; seeking humility helps us appreciate the important things in life: our relationship to our fellow human, our relationship with God. I'll pick on myself. Last winter I submitted a narrative about racism, a personal one, a story about how two people I love dearly, my dad and my Alabama grandmother, contributed to racism implicitly expected of me. To make a long story short, both of them said something racist as if it was God's truth.

Even at the age of ten, I sensed they might be full of it, but their words till sowed a distrust of Black people that was years in its undoing. So I wrote about that, including a passage about how the beautiful Southern drawl of my grandma wrapped its lips around the N-word. That story got published in this book *Black Stories* published by the Des Moines Art Center. The book is a companion piece to a gorgeous show of African-American art that hung there last October through March.

I have a choice here. I can be proud that my piece was published, or I can be humbled that my work was included. I can thump my chest about being featured, or I can bow my head, especially given the contents of my essay, and be grateful my writing was included with so many wonderful stories and so many reproductions of powerful art.

Pride gives us false gods, even *makes* us false gods. Think of athletes standing on the winners' podium at the Olympics. This can be a moment where one's ego

screams out “World, look at me!” Or it can be a time where that athlete can acknowledge their membership in generations of women and men who strove to be the best they can be. Some of you may remember the summer Olympics of 1968 held in Mexico City. You remember that time Tommy Smith won first and John Carlos won third in the 200-meter dash? When they took the podium, they risked ridicule and worse by lowering their heads and lifting fists in the air. *(Show Pulitzer Prize picture of the.) They forewent pride and stood up against the racial injustice of their time.

A side note: in an interview 30 years later, Tommy Smith said he did not consider the closed-fist salute a gesture of Black power, but rather a rallying call for human rights, **all** humans’ right.

Two young Black men at the height of their talents turned their back on *individual* pride to claim solidarity with oppressed people everywhere, especially African-Americans. That took guts, and if you know about the reaction they drew from much of America, they needed guts for decades to come.

So what we could *substitute* for pride? We can reach out for *gratitude*, for *appreciation*, for a feeling of being *honored* or sense of being *humbled* to be included. All those feelings lead us to seek connection and see connection with our fellow humans. More importantly, we can gain that delicious connection with the *grace* of God as the scriptures from James points out. Putting away the lust of pride helps us open up to awe for God and God’s creations, including each other.

Incidental to preparing this sermon, I came across a line from Kahlil Gibran: “Generosity is giving more than you have, and pride is taking less than you need.” We rob ourselves when we seek pride. It’s essentially false, like the temporary buzz of over-drinking or drugging. And those false and shallow undertakings leave us empty, but without a relationship with God and man, the afflicted chase them for a futile lifetime.

The world could use a little more humility and a lot less hubris, a lot more awe and a lot less *me, me, me*. I certainly could. Maybe you too. The world could use a lot more folks laying their garments down for others to walk on, and a lot fewer people pounding their chests.

Benediction

Lord, grant me the joy that humbleness allows. Being humble against the background of Your creation is not humiliating. It is simply honest. It is simply freedom.