

Our Greatest Need

What is our greatest need? At a marriage conference I attended several years ago, I got an answer to that question. The speaker, a psychologist, told the story about a man whose great desire in life was to hear his father say to him, "I love you." His father had died in World War II when the man was only three years old. His mother tried to assure him that his father loved him, but it didn't fill the void in his heart.

One day, the man, now forty years old, was helping his mother move into a retirement community. In cleaning out old papers, they found an old Army picture of his father. The picture suddenly slipped out of his hands and the frame and glass shattered on the floor. As he picked up the mess, the man noticed a piece of paper wedged behind the photo. It was a letter from his father. He knew that he might die in the war, so he wrote a letter to his three-year-old son and hid it behind the picture. In the letter, the father shared all his love for his son. So at the age of forty, this man finally found what he had spent his life searching for: his father's love.

Imagine that you were going through a tough time in your life, and you opened your Bible looking for encouragement. Imagine then that a letter fell out and that it was this passage from Paul's letter to the Galatians: "For in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise."

If you didn't know anything else about Christianity, there is enough encouragement and love in this one passage to keep you going for a long time.

Human beings need to know they are loved; that they are somebody, that they have value, worth and dignity, that someone cares about them, and that their lives matter.

Do you know who you are? You are a child of God. Nothing else in this world matters. Are you male? Irrelevant. Female? It doesn't matter. Are you from a wealthy, prominent family? Good for you. That gives you many advantages in our society, but it means nothing when you stand before God. What about your ethnic origin? Though you may take pride in the land of your ancestors, that will not get you into heaven. Jesus died for our sins. He accepts us as part of his family. That's all that matters. Thanks to the amazing grace of Jesus, you and I are children of God.

Howard Thurman was the Dean of Chapel at Boston University. He was also the first African American professor at that respected institution. He inspired many of the leaders of the civil rights movement, including Martin Luther King, Jr. Thurman attributed much of his own sense of dignity and vocation to his grandmother, a former slave. She constantly told him, "You are somebody!"

In the 1950s, when parts of America were still segregated, Dr. Thurman and his family travelled through the South. They stopped to rest for a few moments at a park along the highway. His daughters spotted a swing set on a playground in the park and ran to it. They were too young to read the sign which warned that this playground was for “whites only.”

Sadly, but patiently, Thurman told his daughters that they could not play there and explained why. This was their first encounter with racism, and they burst into tears. So, much as his grandmother had done when he was a child, Thurman gathered the children into a warm embrace and said to them, “Listen, you little girls are somebody. In fact, you are so important and so valuable to God and so powerful that it takes the governor, the lieutenant governor, and the whole state police force to keep you little girls off those swings!”¹

You are somebody! It’s terrible when a person believes that his or her life doesn’t count. We see it all the time. Teenagers who feel they don’t fit in. Adult loners who keep sabotaging their relationships. The elderly who wonder if it wouldn’t be better for everyone if they went ahead and died. Suicide bombers and terrorists who lack self-worth and feel that death is preferable to life. There are many, many people in this world who don’t think their lives matter.

When I lived in San Diego, I read a story about Tony Sanchez. He was only five years old when he was sent to a Mexican prison for juveniles for allegedly murdering his brother. Tony’s parents committed the murder, but they disappeared after telling the police that he was the killer. In prison, the inmates taunted Tony, abused him and he even got into fights over food.

After several years, an American professor by the name of Carolyn Koons heard about his story. She battled the bureaucracy and a corrupt prison warden for almost three years to secure Tony’s release and adoption at the age of twelve. She took him with her to California, enrolled him in a fine school and showed him the love he never had from his birth parents. Tony, however, was too emotionally scared and he continued to get into trouble, yelling at his mother and being rebellious to everyone who tried to help him. Carolyn refused to give up on Tony. She made him his favorite food, hamburgers, never quit hugging him after his acid words, and never stopped letting him know that he was loved.

Then came graduation from junior high school. Tony made an unexpected speech to his class. In almost a stutter, he said, “I want to thank my mom for adopting me and bringing me to the United States.” Then, with tears streaming down his face, he yelled, “I love you, Mom. I love you. I love you.”

Why did Tony love the woman who adopted him? It was because he could look into her eyes and see himself as someone who was loved.

You and I know this is the greatest need of any human being. Something or someone has told us that we are unacceptable, unlovable, unworthy. When we have a low opinion of ourselves, we tend to lash out at others. We engage in self-destructive behavior. What we need more than

anything in the world is to look into the eyes of Jesus and see ourselves as we really are: sons and daughters of God.

So much of the pain in the world is caused by people who are in pain. They treat others badly because they feel bad about themselves. Something in their lives has convinced them they are unworthy, unloved, and unfit compared to others. This morning, I am here to tell you: Never think of yourself as a loser, a misfit, a failure. Never let other people do that to you. Hold your head high, affirm your dignity and keep telling yourself, "I am somebody because in God's eyes, I am."

Several years ago there was a news story about an incident that took place in northern Italy. A rich man was driving his luxury Lamborghini into a parking lot. As he did so, a parking lot attendant motioned to the spot where the man was supposed to pull in. But the rich man ignored the attendant and pulled into another space instead. Soon the two of them got into an argument, with the attendant trying to explain to the rich man why he was not allowed to park where he did. Eventually, the wealthy man ended the conversation by sneering at the parking lot attendant and saying, "You are nobody!"

The attendant did not take the insult lying down. He took the rich man to court, where a judge ruled that telling someone that they are nobody is not only impolite, under Italian law it's also illegal. The judge found the rich man guilty of slander, fining him three hundred euros plus five hundred euros in court costs.

I generally do not think people should sue one another, but what a great service it would be for humanity if every person that made someone else feel small, insignificant, unworthy could be held accountable for their words or actions. Many people have been beaten down by the world. In ways large and small, we are told we are no good, of no value, having no worth and that we are inferior to others. All that is lie.

The Roman Catholic spiritual writer Henri Nouwen says about this: "The world tells you many lies about who you are, and you simply must be realistic enough to remind yourself of this. Every time you feel hurt, offended, or rejected you must dare to say to yourself, these feelings, strong as they may be, are not telling me the truth about myself. The truth, even though I can't feel it right now, is that I am the chosen child of God, precious in the God's eyes, called the beloved from all eternity and held safe in an everlasting embrace."²

As a priest, I have seen this repeatedly: people who have a life-changing experience of Christ gain a new perspective on the world and on themselves. They recognize they are somebody, children of God. And not only that, but they begin to treat others as children of God.

I'll never forget a postal worker in a parish I served who for the first seven years of her job just wanted to deliver the right letter to the right box and be done with it. Then something happened. She met Jesus at a Cursillo weekend. From then on, she began noticing the people on her route. She listened to them. She heard stories of sorrow and pain but also of joy.

Domestic abuse, weddings, births, deaths – she listened and cared, and tried to be a comforting presence for those who needed to speak to her. This woman began to treat people on her route as brothers and sisters in Christ. Whether they were Christian or not, she treated them that way. She told me that a homebound person said to her, “You are the only contact I have with the outside world. You are so important to my life.” Because this postal worker discovered that she was somebody in Christ, she became committed to letting the people know they were somebody as well.

I hope that happens to you. People who discover they are somebody in Christ find it easy to let other people know they are somebody as well. That is the meaning of Christian evangelism. It’s about letting the world know that because of who Jesus is and what he has done, we all matter. Every one of us. Old and young, male, and female, rich and poor, black, and white, Anglo and Latino – we are all children of God.

Several years ago Heather, Allison, and I were at a planetarium where I learned that you and I are literally made from stardust. Our bodies are made of matter that once was a star. I found this knowledge mind-blowing. I thought of the Genesis story of Adam being created from earth, and now the scientific story of humanity being made from stars.

We heard that we were created from the dust of the earth, but have you ever thought of it being stardust? You are somebody. Because Christ has come down from heaven, you are now part of his family, the family of God. In the vast expanse of the universe, you remain always and forever God’s beloved child.

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Text – Galatians 3:23-29

Proper 7, C

Advent Episcopal Church, Sun City West, AZ

1. Thomas G. Long, *Testimony: Talking Ourselves into Being Christian* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004)
2. Henri Nouwen, *Life of the Beloved: Spiritual Living in a Secular World* (Faithworks Publications, 2002)