

The 4th Sunday in Lent: Holy Trinity Church: March 11, 2018

Ephesians 2: 1-10: *Whoever I am, you know me, O God and I am yours.*

Preached

By

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In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen

Is there anyone here who doesn't appreciate a nice compliment from time to time? I believe a compliment is truly oxygen for the soul. The truth is that all of us need a little "pick-me-up" from time to time. Well, how about this little verse from today's epistle from St. Paul's letter to the Ephesians. I prefer this translation. *"For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do."* Just think about that. We are God's handiwork or as one scholar has translated it, *"We are God's work of art."* When Paul says we are God's handiwork, he is not saying we are perfect. He doesn't even claim that we are better than other people. In fact he begins this passage describing in detail what rascals we have been. He writes, *"As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins . . ."* But then he writes, *"But because of His great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us*

alive with Christ.” My sisters and brothers, we are God’s handiwork because of what God has done for us through Jesus Christ.

This is so important. What you become as a person is determined to a great extent by how you see yourself. You cannot consistently perform in a manner which is inconsistent with the way you see yourself. I believe, if you hold a picture of yourself long enough in your mind’s eye, then you will be drawn toward it. Great living starts with a picture held in your imagination of what you would like to do or be. Learning to accept yourself and believe in yourself is one of life’s most important battles.

In 1971 Nancy Miller was a shy fifth-grader in Atlanta, Georgia, with a poor self-concept. This poor self-concept came partially from the fact that she was born with only her pinkie fingers and two partial fingers on both of her hands. She was too embarrassed to learn square dancing because she didn’t think the boys would want to hold her hands. But through the encouragement of her Physical Education teacher, who chose Nancy as his partner, she learned to accept herself and believe in herself. Today, Nancy Miller is a mother of four who plays the piano and types 65 words per minute all because of a teacher who was there for her.

May I say that learning to accept yourself and believe in yourself may be a particularly difficult task for women. Dr. William Dorfman is a dentist to the stars in Los Angeles, California. He also donates his skills to a local women's shelter, where he fixes the teeth of homeless women, prostitutes, abused women and children. One benefit of his work at the shelter is seeing the women develop a new sense of self-confidence once the work has been done on their teeth. As Dr. Dorfman says of his patients, "She becomes a new person because she sees a new person." Now why do I say this may be a more difficult task in our society for women?

Studies show that starting in about fourth grade, boys tend to overestimate their school performance compared to how their teachers rate them; girls, on the other hand, tend to underestimate their performance. Why that is so I do not know, but it is. Furthermore, boys tend to attribute their failures to bad luck, the difficulty of the tasks, or not trying hard enough. Girls tend to attribute their failures to personal incompetence. This may be one reason why girls are more prone to depression. Researchers note that "believing you are competent can be highly motivating, even when it's not true. Conversely, believing that you are incompetent can undermine your motivation, even when it's not true." As a person thinks in their heart, so they are"--says

Proverbs 23. As you know, one of the mysteries in our society right now is the

increase in suicides among middle-aged males. Middle-aged men in the 45 to 60 age group experienced a 43 percent increase in suicide deaths from 1997 to 2014, and the rise has been even sharper since 2005. What does that say about our society? What challenges do these men face that make them decide that taking their own life is the only way out? The problem is that our self-image is determined at a very early age, and it is very difficult to undo. I truly believe, we are who we are because of where we have been. And that's true. We are who we are because of where we have been.

Psychologists tell us that by the time we reach two years of age, 50 percent of what we ever believe about ourselves has been formed. Think about that, parents. Think of the importance of those first two years of life. By the age of six, 60 percent of our self-belief has been established, and by the age of eight, about 80 percent. By the time we reach the age of fourteen, over 99 percent of us have a well-developed sense, either correctly or incorrectly, of who we are.

Many years ago, there was a book about a character named Bunker Bean. Bunker Bean was orphaned at a young age, and he grew up in different foster homes. Consequently, Bunker had no self-esteem. One day, a spiritual medium, a huckster, moved into Bunker's boarding house. The medium claimed that Bunker had been Napoleon Bonaparte in another life. Napoleon

Bonaparte was powerful, intelligent, self-confident and the absolute opposite of Bunker Bean. So Bunker began studying everything he could about Napoleon. As he studied, he began to take on some of his hero's positive characteristics. He became more self-confident, powerful, decisive, even intelligent. One day, this medium who had inspired Bunker was revealed to be an absolute fraud. But that didn't matter to Bunker Bean. By then, he had become the kind of person the medium had told him he could become. Our self-image is determined at a very early age and it is very difficult to undo. But that doesn't mean it is impossible.

If you remember nothing else from this sermon, please remember this: It is never too late to change your self-image. I know what some of you are thinking. You're thinking, Fr. John, you don't know me that well. I'm not worth anything. And it's too late for me to change. One man said to a priest friend of mine, "Father, you know how at big basketball games, when their team is ahead, the home fans sometimes taunt the other team by cruelly chanting 'Over-rated, over-rated'? Deep in my heart I hear that same taunt: 'Over-rated, over-rated.' There is no hope for me." Oh my sisters and brothers, but there is hope. If you hold a picture of yourself long and steady enough in your mind's eye, then you will be drawn toward it. Great living starts with a picture held in your imagination of what you would like to do or

be. May I suggest you add another picture to those already in your mind? I preach this picture in every funeral sermon. It is a picture of Jesus Christ with a lamb in his arms. That lamb is you. Now picture Jesus with his arms wide open, with a big smile on his face. He wants to take you in his arms and let you know how special you are to him. Picture Jesus Christ standing at a door knocking. That door where he is knocking is your heart. Jesus wants to come into your heart and make you a new creation. So, that when you die and come face to face with Jesus, your soul will roll into His arms and he will say to you, “Well done my good and faithful servant welcome to my home and your home.” Remember, it’s never too late by the grace of God to change the way you think about yourself. But, you must do it now. Don’t put it off.

When I taught Allied Health Sciences at the Lincoln Technical Institute, I loved to watch students come alive in their classes. One of the courses I taught was medical terminology and that’s a place where you can empower people to become professionals in the medical field by teaching them the language of medicine. My students would often tell me how beaten down they were from poor academic experiences in high school. The image of themselves as an intelligent person who can learn was poor. Before I passed back their first graded paper, I would give them a little pep talk: I would say to them, this grade is not for you. This grade is for a piece of work you turned in. Then I

would ask them, if they wanted to know what I thought of them, and usually they wanted to hear it. So I would continue and I always told them, I think you are made in the image and likeness of Almighty God and you are of inestimable worth.

My dear sisters and brothers in Christ, the meaning of life is to share with people the wonderful news that we are the daughters and sons of God. St. Paul writes: *“For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works.”* Can you imagine that God is saying that about your life? It makes no difference who you are. It makes no difference what you’ve done. It doesn’t matter how many strikes are against you. You are God’s work of art. With God’s help you can turn your mess into a masterpiece.

The great Christian philosopher and martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote a poem just one month before he was executed by Adolf Hitler: “Who am I? They often tell me I would step from my cell’s confinement calmly, cheerfully, firmly, like a squire from his country-house. Who am I? They also tell me I would bear the days of misfortune calmly, smilingly, proudly, like one accustomed to win. Am I really then all that which other men tell of? Or am I only what I know of myself, Restless and longing and sick, like a bird in a cage, struggling for breath weary and empty at praying, at thinking, at

making, faint, and ready to say farewell to it all? Who am I? This or the other? They mock me, these lonely questions of mine. Whoever I am, you know me, O God and I am yours.” That is the ultimate answer to a poor self-image. So, let us pray, whoever I am, you know me, O God and I am yours. Amen.