

### “The Power to Be Me”

This morning I would like for us to reflect on the power that God has given us to be ourselves. That may sound a bit odd to some, but I fully believe that God has gifted us with intellect and free will so that we can fully be whom God intended for us to be.

Elisabeth Elliot, in her book Let Me Be a Woman, records the story of Gladys Aylward who was unable to accept the looks God had given her. Ms. Aylward told how when she was a child she had two great sorrows. One, that while all her friends had beautiful golden hair, hers was black. The other, that while her friends were still growing, she had stopped. She was about four feet ten inches tall. But when at last she reached the country to which God had called her to be a missionary, she stood on the wharf in Shanghai and looked around at the people to whom God had called her. "Every single one of them," she said, "had black hair. And every one of them had stopped growing when I did." She was able to look to God and exclaim, "Lord God, You know what You're doing!" (Elizabeth Elliott. Let Me Be a Woman. Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers. 1976. p. 23)

The fact that we place so much emphasis upon the way we look, as if the totality of our being can be determined by our external features, really does sound silly. Being weight-conscious because of health reasons is understandable, but being consumed by appearance for reasons of acceptability has more to do with an individual's self-esteem than it does with how that person is received by others. Why is it that we place so much emphasis upon our external appearance? Some say, "Thin is in"; fashion dictates it. I find that line of thinking quite shallow. The "power to be me" has nothing to do with what I weigh, the color of my hair, or any other external feature.

So what *is* to be considered when an individual realizes that their personhood is a gift from God? Maybe first, one should assess what it means to be created in the image of God. The Hebrew understanding of the image of God had nothing to do with hair color, weight, or anything else related to our physical bodies. We are not created in God's *physical* image, because God does not have a physical image. God is spirit. Being created in God's image and likeness has nothing to do with how God looks and for that matter how *we* look. God does not share our skin tone or pigmentation, because God doesn't have skin.

Being created in the image of God instead gives us the power to be co-creators with God. Think about that a minute; we are co-creators with God. Did God quit creating after the creation of humanity as listed in Genesis 1 and 2? I certainly hope not; I think that God is still creating today. If I call myself a follower of God, then I have to believe that God is still at work in all of human history, still creating good out of bad situations, still creating hope for the hopeless. And as God's crown jewel of creation, the only creature blessed with God's image, we are also co-creators. We were created for good; notice that at the end of the sixth day, the day on which humanity was created, that God saw all that had been created, and it was very good.

Years ago, Roland Byrd, the Campus Minister at Virginia Tech shared with me the "Gospel According to Cinderella." It reads,

*You! Cinderella, listening to these words right now . . . how's your cellar? Dark? Damp? Lonely?*

*Ever feel that the whole world is going to a ball while you stay home in rags to mop the cellar?*

*Swish a few more suds on the red tile floor while you ponder this one: was Cinderella a princess in rags or a scrub-girl who became a princess?*

*This is where the "Gospel According to Cinderella" gets to be good news – she was a princess in rags with all the possibility, waiting to be set free.*

*This amplifies a basic principle in life: most of us see ourselves in the "scrub-girl" role –wasting away in dingy halls, dominated by others, afraid to exert ourselves, even with the help of the believing godmother!*

*There is a whole kingdom awaiting the person who learns her worth and finds her joy in the midst of life.*

We are God's favorite creation. Psalm 8:5 reads, "Yet you have made humans a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor." We are the pinnacle of the created order, above all else that God has created. But lest we get the big head, we need to remember that there is responsibility in being at the top. We have dominion over the created order: fish of the sea, the fowl of the air, the plants and all the animals. We were not created to be evil; we were created for God. And as co-creators with God, we should continue to create. Because of the gift of intellect, we are to make the world better; it is not the responsibility of the animals, the plants, the fish, nor the birds to make this world a better place. Our world was created perfectly, and it is our responsibility to try to restore the earth to its created perfection. So the place to start is with ourselves, which should be the subject of which we know the most. There are some who know more about how to help someone else than how to help themselves. There are some who know more about farming than about how to grow spiritually. There are some who know more about how to make money than about how to make a difference in this world. So we are to start with ourselves. What should we do in exercising the

power to be ourselves, the persons whom God intended for us to be?

Both psychologists Abraham Maslow and Karen Horney did extensive work on the development of self-esteem and self-worth in an individual. Maslow's "hierarchy of needs" theory leading to self-actualization is now classic, but Karen Horney's work has perhaps an even stronger application. She found that when an individual actually attempts something--intellectually or physically, be it a memory verse, an athletic event, going for a promotion, or even a speech--the great majority of the time the individual will succeed. Yet when a person does not make the attempt, they have an impression of failure. The dramatic finding is that for most people, their self-impression is one of failure more than success, because most of the time they do not even make the attempt. (Bert Decker, You've Got to Be Believed to Be Heard, New York, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992).

Could that be said of you: I'm not going to try to fulfill God's intention for my life by not even attempting to better myself? Are you afraid you too are suffering from the epidemic of low self-esteem? Finish the sentence: "If at first you don't succeed" . . . If you came up with something along the lines of "you are utterly useless," there may be cause for concern.

What separates the high from the low on the self-esteem meter is *response* to failure, not the fact that you *might* fail, or that you *did* fail, says University of Washington psychologist Jonathon Brown. He put 172 people--81 with high self-esteem, the rest with low--through a computer word game. Half the participants received a version too difficult to do in the time allotted, assuring their failure.

Afterwards, Brown asked them to evaluate their performance. For those lacking self-esteem, failure hit like the proverbial ton of bricks. Only feelings of shame and humiliation rose from the rubble. Worse, they overgeneralized their failure, rating their intelligence and competence more negatively after a poor performance than a successful one. People with high self-esteem did just the opposite. They rated their intelligence a bit higher after failure, compensating for their sub-par performance. This is the value of self-esteem, explains Brown: It enables us to respond to events good or bad in ways that bolster our sense of worth. (*Psychology Today*, Sept./Oct. 1995, p. 14.)

So how does the "power to be me" affect our self-esteem? God has granted us the ability to engineer ourselves into the person that God created us to be. As co-creators with God, we are to learn more of whom we are; our journey of self-discovery can lead us to be more confident in other areas.

Thomas J. Watson, Jr., had trouble living in the shadow of his father, the long-time head of IBM. Always a lackluster student, the younger Watson even needed a tutor to get through the IBM sales school. "I had no distinctions, no successes," he writes in Father, Son, & Co.

When Watson started flying lessons, however, something happened. "What a feeling!" he says. "I was good at flying, instantly good. I plowed everything into this mad pursuit and gained a lot of self-confidence." This single success led to greater successes. Because of his experience as a pilot, Watson became an officer in the U.S. Air Force during World War II. He was not brilliant, he concedes. But he discovered he had "an orderly mind and an unusual ability to focus on what was important and to put it across to others." Watson eventually became chief executive of IBM--and took the company into the computer age. In 15 years, he increased IBM's revenues almost tenfold. ("How 'Average' People Excel," by Alan Loy McGinnis, *Reader's Digest*, August 1992, p. 75.)

Self-confidence is not a bad thing; some equate self-confidence with pride. Instead, I see self-confidence as a building block in understanding ourselves better. If we are created in God's image, then we are inherently good. Our *choice* is to be evil or to do wrong. How can we call something that God created "bad?" As the crown jewel of creation, humanity was viewed by God, as listed in Genesis 1:31, as being very good. God not only created us to be good, God also believes in us. If only we believed that about ourselves . . . it might change the way we view ourselves.

It is a proven fact that individuals respond positively to affirmative reinforcement. Louisville, Kentucky, Patrolman Joe Martin collected coins from parking meters during the day. In his private time, he was director of boxing for the Louisville Recreation Department. He wanted to help the young boys of Louisville improve their self-image and learn to be good boxers. One night, an eighty-nine-pound, twelve-year-old boy came to the gym in tears. He was so angry he could hardly speak. Joe asked him what was wrong, and the boy told him that someone had stolen his new bicycle. He said he wanted to whip somebody.

Joe asked him, "Do you know how to fight?" and the boy said, "No, but I'd fight them anyway!" That was the beginning. The young boy would come to the gym and work his heart out. Joe saw his talent and soon began saying, "You're the greatest; you're the greatest." The boy wanted to live up to Joe's expectations; he put his heart into being a boxer. He liked being the "greatest." He reveled in working his young body into peak-fighting shape. He began

believing he was the "greatest." For 106 fights, Joe coached the boy into manhood and then Cassius Clay competed in the 1960 Olympics. Cassius Clay was indeed "the greatest." (Sheila Murray Bethel, Making a Difference, New York: Berkley Books, 1990.)

As most of you know, it was later that Cassius Clay changed his name to Muhammad Ali. His trainer Joe Martin not only thought his student was the greatest; Muhammad Ali not only thought he was the greatest; ESPN called Muhammad Ali the third greatest athlete of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, behind Michael Jordan and Babe Ruth. Muhammad Ali was obviously chosen as the greatest boxer of the 20th century.

Young Cassius Clay excelled not only because of natural talent and good coaching, but he prevailed because someone believed in him. And that someone was not just anyone, but someone he respected.

God believes in us. As the crown jewel of creation, God's favorite creature, we have been given privileged responsibility over the entire created order. God believes in us. We have been created in God's image and in God's likeness. The only barriers in undoing the "power to be me" are ones that are self-imposed. God called *us* the greatest in the creation story; God has given us the intellect and the free will to engineer ourselves to reach our fullest potential. Becoming self-actualized, being all that we can be, is not intended for our own glory. Utilizing the "power to be me" is not for selfish gain. Instead we have been commissioned by God for relationship and service.

An American tourist in Paris, who purchased an inexpensive amber necklace in a trinket shop, was shocked when he had to pay quite a high duty on it to clear customs in New York. This aroused his curiosity, so he had it appraised. After looking at the object under a magnifying glass, the jeweler said, "I'll give you \$25,000 for it." Greatly surprised, the man decided to have another expert examine it. When he did, he was offered \$10,000 more.

"What do you see that's so valuable about this old necklace?" asked the astonished man.

"Look through this glass," replied the jeweler. There, before his eye was an inscription: "From Napoleon Bonaparte to Josephine." The value of the necklace came from its identification with a famous person. You and I automatically have worth because we have been created in the image of God.

Let's be thankful that we serve a God who trusts us to be co-creators; let's be grateful that we serve a God who believes in us as individuals; let's be appreciative that we serve a God who is interested in who we are and how the fullest expression of our identities can be used for the Kingdom of God. And then let's begin to exercise that God-given power to be ourselves, unique persons with individual gifts and talents. Thanks be to God for creating us just as we are.