

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
“Being Human: Dark Side Pride and the Poor in Spirit”
Rev. Dr. John Judson
February 18, 2018

Genesis 3:1-7
Matthew 5:1-3
Luke 15:11-24

She is 5’-5” tall. She weighs 115 pounds. She is seventeen years old and there she sat calm, cool and collected as she was being interviewed by Lester Holt. Chloe Kim had just won the gold medal for women’s half-pipe and was reflecting on the event. Holt asked her why, when she already had the gold medal won before her last run, did she go all out to have a better one. Her replay was that she was not there to beat anyone, she was there to do the best that she could. And then, almost as an aside, she said, “And I’m really proud of myself.” I am really proud of myself. What’s wrong with that? I ask because the first of the seven deadly sins is that of pride. Pride is referred to in negative connotations throughout the scriptures. Psalms, Proverbs and the prophets never view pride in a positive way. And yet, we teach our children to be proud of who they are; proud of their accomplishments. We encourage people to take pride in their schools, their friends and their nation. So, what’s wrong with that? The answer is nothing...nothing until pride turns to the dark side. Let me explain.

Pride, as we have noted, is not necessarily a bad thing. It comes out of our sense of an appropriate love of self. Remember, that Jesus teaches us that we are to love others as we love...ourselves. We are to see ourselves as children of God, beloved, cared for and embraced for who we are, as we are. We are to see ourselves as individuals with gifts that we are called on to use for the good of God and the good of the world around us. When we use those gifts and use them well, it makes sense that we should take some pride in a job well done. The problem comes when sin enters the picture. What sin does is take what is good and suggest that if a little of it is good, then more is better. If a little pride is good, the more pride is better. And if more pride is better, then even more pride is better than that. This is where we encroach on the dark side of pride. What happens is that this dark side pride causes us to do three things. It causes us to demean others. After all if we are as good as we think we are then others are beneath us. It causes us to destroy relationships. Again, if we are better than others then we do not need them, so we cast them aside. Finally, it causes a diminishment of our own humanity. It does so because our pride has isolated us from the life that comes from God and neighbor.

One way to see how this works is to go to Jesus’ story about the Prodigal. What’s at the heart of this story is pride. It’s the story about a man with two sons, both of whom are overflowing with dark-side-pride. This morning however, we will focus only on the younger son. The younger son’s dark-side-pride and its results can be seen in three events. First, the younger son believes that he deserves his inheritance even though his father is still alive and well. This dark-side-pride leads him to demean his father, by treating him as if he were already dead, his older brother by demanding his inheritance first, and his God, by not honoring his

father and mother. Second, we can see the dark-side-pride in that almost immediately after he is given his inheritance, he chooses to leave home and go to a distant country. By doing so he destroys the only relationships that give his life a sense of groundedness; groundedness in faith and family. Finally, after he has squandered his inheritance he finds himself living not with human beings, but with pigs whose food he longed to eat. Jesus' audience would have understood that the younger son, was now an animal and not a human being. This is what dark-side-pride does. It leaves us empty and alone.

What then is the antidote? How then do we avoid the dangers of dark-side-pride? The answer is to be poor in Spirit. Even as I say those words, there is something about them that is a bit unpleasant. It is unpleasant because, in our American Christian culture, we are not supposed to be spiritually impoverished. We are supposed to be spiritual giants. Rather than being poor in Spirit we are to feel sorry for those who are poor in spirit...oops a bit of dark-side-pride there. The thought then of pursuing spiritual poverty is anathema to our American sensibilities. What we need to realize though is that being poor in spirit is not something we pursue, it is something that we are. Let me say that again. Being poor in spirit is not something that we pursue. It is something that we are. And only when we embrace that spiritual poverty can we truly find our way to the Kingdom of Heaven. For you see, we are all poor in spirit. What this means is that we all have some place inside where we are less than fully human. There is some place inside where we are broken; where we are hurting. Someplace where our lives are not what they need to be; Where we are in need of love, grace and redemption. The gift of admitting we are poor in spirit allows us to reconnect with God and neighbor, thereby bringing us back into the fullness of being human.

Once again, to see this, let's return to our prodigal son. We pick up the story where the prodigal son comes, as Jesus puts it, to himself and realizes that even his father's servants eat better than he does. In other words, he realizes his own poverty of spirit. He realizes that he is not capable of living on his own. He realizes that he needs life-giving relationships. On his way home he practices his speech, where he apologizes for his past pride and offers himself up to be less than he was; to be a servant rather than a son. What happens next, not only could he not have predicted it, but neither could Jesus' listeners. The father, seeing the son coming, runs to him and embraces him and basically ignores the son's apology. He ignores it because it is not necessary. The son came to himself, acknowledge his poverty of spirit and through that reconnected himself with the Father; the act which makes him whole again.

The temptation to dark-side-pride is all around us. It is part of the human condition beginning in the garden and continuing to today. It is there regardless of our race, gender, sexual orientation, income level or nationality. It crosses all boundaries. Yet its victory is not inevitable. It is not because we have been given the antidote in this first beatitude; blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven. The challenge for us then is to embrace our inner spiritual poverty and recognize our ultimate dependence on God rather than on self.

My challenge to you then is this, to ask yourselves, how am I embracing my own spiritual poverty such that I can stay lovingly connected to God, neighbor and the Kingdom of Heaven.