

LIVING BEYOND YOURSELF

Scriptures: I Thessalonians 4:1-12; Romans 12:1-2

In a book called *It's Friday, but Sunday's Coming*, a Christian writer named Anthony Campolo tells this story: "When I was a student in college, I went steady with a girl for about a year and a half. After that time she had had enough of me and decided to (break up). I was upset, to say the least, less because I had lost her than because it had been a blow to my ego. She told me it was all over and I can remember saying to her, 'You can't do this to me. I need you, I want you, my life would be meaningless without you.' She responded, 'Gee, that's a shame.'"

Campolo goes on to say, "I deserved that response. After all, the only reason I gave her to stay with me was to serve my own self-interest. *I* needed her. *I* wanted her. *I* was concerned about what she was doing to *me*. In none of my romantic mumblings had I said anything that expressed concern for her" (p. 48).

For a long time now we in America have been obsessed with self-fulfillment and self-esteem. In some ways this has been a good thing. As psychologist David Myers points out, people with low self-esteem are more vulnerable to depression, anxiety, loneliness, eating disorders, and substance abuse, which is why schools and churches have been on a kick to increase children's self-esteem. Self-esteem is a good thing, but it is not the whole answer. Quoting various studies, David Myers points out that male teenagers who engage in sexual activity at a young age tend to have higher than average self-esteem. So do bullies, gang leaders, racists, and terrorists (*The American Paradox*, pp. 166-167).

Perhaps that is why the Bible does not seem particularly concerned about self-esteem. In I Thessalonians 4:1 the apostle Paul says, "Finally, brothers and sisters, we ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus that, as you learned from us how you ought to live and please God (as, in fact, you are doing), you should do so more and more." Paul is not concerned whether the Thessalonians have high self-esteem. He is concerned whether they please God. And how do they please God? Verse 3: "For this is the will of God, your sanctification."

Sanctification means becoming holy. Notice how often Paul talks about holiness in our scripture reading this morning:

- Verse 4: "That each of you know how to control your own body in holiness and honor.
- Verse 7: "For God did not call us to impurity but in holiness.
- Verse 13 of the previous chapter, the verse immediately before our scripture reading: "And may God so strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints."

Even the word "saints" in Greek literally means "holy ones." Paul is less concerned about your self-esteem and more concerned about your holiness.

What does it mean to holy? It does not mean thinking you are better than other people. That style of thinking is for people obsessed with their self-esteem. If you are worried about being better than other people you are not thinking about holiness. To be holy means to be set apart for a special purpose. As Paul uses the term, saints are not better than other people. They are people set apart for a mission.

On a couple of occasions when my children were younger, I took them out to Eastern Washington University to the Seahawks training camp. It was interesting to hear their coach, Mike Holmgren, explain why he brought the Seahawks all the way over to Eastern for their training camp. He said he did it to get them away from any distractions. Well, he certainly succeeded in Cheney. In Cheney the players were away from their family and friends. They could not go home at night to their wives or visit their girl friends. They lived together, ate together, practiced together. It sort of reminded me of a monastery. In Cheney the Seahawks were like cloistered monks. Instead of daily prayer they had daily practices and conditioning. But it was the same idea.

To accomplish their mission the Seahawks had to become a separated community. That is what it means to be holy: to be a people set apart by God for a special purpose. I doubt all of the Seahawks would have chosen each other as friends. They weren't there because they like to hang out together. They were there because they had been drafted or signed as free agents. They had been called together onto that team by the coaches, and the key to their success was learning to work together as a team to carry out the plays they were given.

I think that is a good picture of what it means to be a church. You were called into Jesus' family—drafted, if you want to put it that way. And this is training camp. You may not have chosen this particular group of people to hang out with, but that does not matter. You are here because you have been chosen to be part of a group with a mission. And that is the sense in which you are saints. Saints are people set apart for a mission.

To accomplish their mission, the Seahawks had to separate themselves from the rest of the world and to accept disciplines and even suffering that other people might not accept. It seemed like every time I went to Cheney to watch them practice it was 100 degrees. The players were sweating profusely. Some of them needed IVs after practice. And they were always getting yelled at by the coaches, even the star players. The coaches railed them with words I can't repeat here in church. It was not an experience in building self-esteem. It was an experience in building a team. Self-esteem is about you as an individual, comparing yourself to other individuals. Training camp is about you as a team preparing for a mission bigger than yourself.

Like the Seahawks training camp, there are certain disciplines that go along with being part of God's team. Paul talks about that in our scripture reading. One has to do with sex. I Thessalonians 4:3: "For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from fornication." Fornication means having sex with a person to whom you are not married. Abstaining from fornication is one of the disciplines of holiness. It is part of the training you need to show God's steadfast love to the world. The idea is that lifelong faithfulness in our sexual relationships can help us demonstrate and experience God's lifelong faithfulness to us.

Another discipline of holiness involves work. I Thessalonians 4:11-12: “Aspire to live quietly, to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands, as we directed you, so that you may behave properly toward outsiders and be dependent on no one.” That is not a very inspiring picture of work. Mind your own business and support yourself. Not much in that to build your self-esteem. But life isn’t about self-esteem. It’s about holiness. It is about living beyond yourself. It is about belonging to a community of people who have a mission bigger than themselves.

You seniors who are graduating: I’ll bet anything that you will hear graduation speakers tell you about your potential, about how you can be anything you want to be if you set your mind to it. Don’t believe it. Seriously, how many people do you think get to be professional athletes, famous actors, Nobel scientists, or fabulously rich entrepreneurs? It is not going to happen to most of you.

Now here is the good news. It doesn’t matter. The meaning of your life is not wrapped up in how famous you are, how impressive you are, how much power you wield, or how much wealth you have accumulated. The meaning of your life is that you are holy. You are set apart by God for a team with a mission, and if you stick with that team and with that mission, an eternity from now, people will still celebrate the good God has done in your life.

- Ken Onstot