

Boast in the Lord

There are a lot of people in this room who are suffering with low self-esteem. You look at yourself as if you are no good, not worth anything, and you lack confidence. There are a number of self-help books out there to address this issue. “The 6 pillars of self-esteem”, “Breaking the Chain of Low Self-Esteem”, “Ten Days to Self-Esteem”, just to name a few. All of these books are going to try to make you feel better about yourself, build yourself up, help you to embrace your imperfections, and accept who you are. The problem with that strategy is the perceived solution is pride: to look at yourself and find value, worth and strength in self.

The problem is that there is an equally dangerous ditch on the other side of that road – pride. We can think too highly of ourselves. So while some of us may suffer from low self-esteem, others of us suffer from narcissism. The sin of pride. Understandably there aren't nearly as many self-help books on narcissism. Because the narcissist isn't going to read it. They think they are doing just fine. Regardless of where you are on that spectrum between low-self esteem and pride, this lesson addresses both ditches.

Our Heroes of Faith sermon series has taken us past the time of Moses and Joshua, to generations after the miracles that they saw in the wilderness. The next generation forgot about the Lord. They probably thought those stories that grandma told were exaggerated. The theme of the book of Judges is found in the very last verse of the book “In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit” (Judges 21:25). People forgot about the Lord and did what they wanted to do. It sounds a little bit like our world, doesn't it? God's people started to worship the false gods of Baal and Asherah. When they turned their back on the Lord, the Lord allowed the Midianites and the Amalekites to pillage the Israelites. It caused them to turn back to the Lord. In prayer they pleaded that the Lord would save them.

The Lord answered those prayers and went to save them by calling a man by the name of Gideon. So he goes to Gideon who obviously didn't think much of himself. When the Lord told Gideon that he wanted him to save the Israelites, his response was, “How can I save Israel? My clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my family.” (Judges 6:15). The angel of the Lord, the 2nd person of the trinity, who is Jesus many years before he is born, appeared to him himself. But Gideon still needed a confidence booster. In the chapter before our lesson he tested God with a fleece. The first night he placed a fleece outside and said if there is only dew on the fleece but not on the ground, then I'll believe you that you are going to do something amazing through me. It happened. But that still wasn't enough. So the next night he tested God again. So he placed the fleece on the ground and this time only if there is dew around the fleece, but the fleece remains dry, then I'll believe you. It happened. So he gets some confidence to lead the Israelites against the Midianites who are attacking and raiding the Israelites. God had to prove to him that regardless of how he felt about himself, his strength was found in the Lord.

So Gideon gathers together as many troops as he could 32,000. But that was nothing in comparison to the 135,000 troops of the Midianites. But the Lord told them he was going to have the victory. Gideon's problem of low self-esteem would be matched by the pride of the Israelites if they would defeat the Midianites with only 32,000 troops. God said to Gideon, “In order that Israel may not boast against me that her own strength has saved her” (Judges 7:2). So now God has to solve this issue of pride among the Israelites. So what does he do? He tells Gideon who is probably trying to think of where he can find more troops, “Tell anyone who is afraid to go home.” So 22,000 troops left. 2/3 of his army walked away when Gideon needed them the most. The Lord was going to give them the victory. But the Lord knew that if only 10,000 troops would destroy the Midianites, they would boast in themselves too. God wanted them to know that their strength wasn't in self, but it was in the Lord. He didn't want their egos boosting with pride in self after this victory. God wanted their pride to be in the Lord.

So now, out of these 10,000 troops who want to fight, he's going to get rid of even more of them. He wants a much smaller number. Imagine if you were the one who had to choose out of the 32,000 troops what would the small group look like who would fight. Get rid of the ones who are afraid. That's a good start. But now, you want the strongest, best fighters of the group. You want the Navy Seals of Ancient Israel to fight for you. Maybe there should be tests of strength. Maybe there should be tests of combat. None of that was done. Instead, in order to remind the Israelites that their strength is not found in themselves, but in the Lord, he chooses them in the most random way. Those who lick the water up from the river like a dog, vs those who lap it up with their hand. There were only 300 people who were chosen, and it wasn't based on strength, fighting ability, endurance, or intelligence. It was based on how they drank water from a river.

It's humbling to know how volatile our egos are. The Lord knew how quickly the Israelites would jump from a feeling of defeatism and low self-esteem as they are oppressed by the Midianites, to a feeling of pride in self after a victory. So the Lord couldn't use more than 300 troops so that they wouldn't get the wrong idea of where their pride should be focused -

not in themselves, but in the Lord. Even worse, when these 300 troops went to fight the battle, what were they armed with? Do you remember? They had a torch in one hand, and a trumpet in the other. Not a sword, not a bow and arrow. A torch and a trumpet. The Lord wanted to make sure they knew that this victory belonged to the Lord so that they had pride in the Lord, not in themselves.

Meanwhile, there's Gideon. He's obviously having second thoughts about taking 300 troops armed with a musical instrument against a massive army. This person who is named as one of our Heroes of Faith in Hebrews 11, needs more faith. So, the Lord tells him to go down to the Midianite camp and listen to what they are saying. So, Gideon, with one other person, snuck into the Midianite camp and heard someone interpret a dream that one of the Midianites had. A barley loaf came tumbling into the Midianite camp with such force that it overturned it and collapsed. That gave Gideon the confidence to move forward with the plans.

And you know what happened. The 300 troops surrounded the Midianites, cracked the clay pots on their torches and blew the trumpets. And it says, "The Lord caused the men throughout the camp to turn on each other with their swords" (Judges 7:22). The Lord confused this massive army. They turned their swords on each other. And the LORD won the victory.

We typically see low self esteem and pride as opposites, but they are simply different reactions to the same problem: they are far too wrapped up in themselves. Look at Gideon who had such low self-esteem. He didn't think he was that important because he didn't come from an important family. He didn't think he could win the victory because he didn't have the strength. He was wrapped up in himself. That can happen to anyone of us. There are more than a few people here today who think that they aren't pretty enough, smart enough or talented enough. And this isn't just teenagers. They wish God would have made them different. It's all about them.

And there are other people here today who are more like the Israelites who easily can fall into the sin of pride. But they wouldn't know it. Their looks, their talents, their intelligence, their money, their job, they think is theirs because of their hard work and their strength. It's all about them. Which ditch are you in? Maybe it depends on the day.

The problem with low self-esteem and pride is not just a character flaw. It's a problem with our faith. We mistakenly think that our identity, our value, our strength, our self-worth is about us. It's not. It's about our God. Let me tell you something that no secular counselor will ever tell you, but something that God tells you. "There is nothing good in you." ("I know that nothing good lives in me.") That's what Paul says in Romans (7:18) "You were dead in your transgressions and sins." That's what Paul says in Ephesians (2:1). We were enemies of God. (Romans 5:10) We were on our way to hell (1 Cor 6:10)

But when you were faced with impossible odds, like Gideon and those Israelites, Jesus fought for us. He went to the cross with our sins. He was beaten down, so that you could be lifted up. We went from being dead in sin, having nothing good in us, enemies of God to being considered holy, perfect, made alive, a child of God and on the way to heaven. He goes into your heart and he sets up his kingdom right there. He gives to you the inheritance that only a first-born child should get. So, if you want to boast, boast in the Lord. If you want to have pride, find your pride in Christ. Your self worth, your identity, your strength has nothing to do with you. It's all wrapped up in Christ. Low self esteem and pride in self quickly fades as we look at our Savior who won the victory for us. Imagine how those Israelites felt as they held a trumpet and a torch and watched down below in the valley as the Lord won the victory for them. That's us.

Just as God did through Gideon and the Israelites, God is going to do amazing things through you. Everything that you are, with your looks, your gifts, your talents, your personality, he designed in eternity so that you could be an effective member of the body of Christ, serving God with all that you are. We aren't fighting against the Midianites. We are up against Satan and sin. God didn't arm us with swords or weapons, or even a torch and a trumpet. He gives us the sword of the Spirit, God's Word. We don't need a fleece, or the interpretation of a dream to get us motivated. We have Christ who died for us. That's all we need.

I know sometimes the enemy can be intimidating. Who am I to rebuke someone for living a sinful lifestyle? I'm a sinner too. Who am I to talk to someone about God's Word? I feel uncomfortable. I don't always know what to say. Who am I to bring up my children in God's Word when I struggle to understand parts of it myself? Who am I to be the Christian leader in my family or the leader in a congregation, when I have so many skeletons in my closet? It's not about you. It never was. It's about Christ, who is your strength, your pride, who has called you into his service. He has called you into battle. Despite what the odds seem to be, the victory is already ours. Amen.