

### ***Somebody Special***

In the name him who while we were still sinners died for us, dear friends in Christ: I wonder if anyone has ever told you that you're somebody special. And I don't mean that in a context of a romantic or some other family or friendship relationship in which of course you are somebody special to those who hold you dear. No, I mean that popular idea that says you are somebody special just for being you. It's an intrinsic sort of thing. It doesn't make any difference what you do, or how well you do it, or how much effort you put into it, or what you actually achieve in the end, you're still *somebody special*. Have you ever been told that?

The idea, which has been around for a long time, was promoted by those progressive thinkers way back in the fifties and sixties who wanted to reengineer society and make it a better place – which was a noble goal, to be sure. But their underlying assumption was that so many people struggle and end up getting behind in life because they suffer from low self esteem. Somewhere along the way they encountered failure and humiliation – maybe for an extended period of time – and that broke their tender spirits. So now they go on failing because they're convinced that's what they are: failures. Every bit of initiative, self-motivation, and creativity in them is shut down by their own negative self-image that tells them there's no point in trying: they're born losers.

Well, the progressive thinkers determined that the best way to prevent a person from falling into this self-perpetuating cycle of misery was to start early in life and make sure that he or she never encountered the kind of failure and humiliation that sets the cycle off in the first place. Therefore, no negative reinforcement can be allowed. We have to build people up with positives only. And so, they created games in which there are no losers, contests in which everyone gets a prize, and tests that everyone passes regardless of performance. No one loses. Everyone is special.

Fortunately, a lot of kids who were raised this way saw right through it. I remember reading about a father who watched his young son play ball. The boy played quite well and so after the game the father wanted to give him some encouragement. He patted his son on the shoulder and said, "You're really an O.K. player." The child burst into tears. The father, who had meant the compliment sincerely, couldn't understand why his son was so upset until the child explained that at his school "O.K." was the lowest possible grade there was. To him it meant that his father thought he was terrible. The kid understood that bad is bad no matter what nice-sounding name you put on it. So, like I said, some people aren't taken in by this sort of "everybody's good/everybody's special" positive reinforcement. Others, however, fall for it hook, line, and sinker. I've read a number of articles about what happens when young adults who were brought up this way first enter the workforce and discover to their shock and horror that in order to keep a job and get promoted and so on they're actually expected to perform to certain standards. "Can you believe it? The boss doesn't think I'm special just for being me!"

I think a great example of this can be seen on a television program called *American Idol*. I assume most of you are familiar with it; but if you're not, suffice it to say that it's basically a nationwide talent show and singing contest. To tell the truth, it's not my favorite, but I do like to watch a season's early episodes when they're doing the first

auditions. Then you can see the sharp contrast between the very good, the merely capable, and the truly awful. It's these latter that I find the most intriguing. It's amazing to me how people who have no talent whatsoever, who can't begin to carry a tune, can't remember the lyrics to the song they've chosen, and have voices that can sound like anything from Minnie Mouse being strangled to bullfrogs with laryngitis – how they can stand there in front of the judges just overflowing with confidence, one hundred percent absolutely certain that they are going all the way to first place in the competition. It defies reason. Now, I suppose it's part optimistic self delusion: "If I want it badly enough, I'm sure to get it"; but I really think a much bigger part of it is that people around them, their family, friends, teachers and others have encouraged them, built them up with positive evaluations and praise so that they sincerely believe that they are as good as they've been told. "Hey, I'm special. I just know it." And then to see them react to the judges who truthfully tell them that they stink – they're incredulous. They become furious at these stupid judges who obviously don't know a thing about music, or they pathetically try again and again to prove themselves: "Wait! Wait! Just give me one more chance."

It really is sad ... and yet at the same time (and I suspect that I'm not the only one who thinks so) it's pretty funny to watch them get their bubbles burst, isn't it? C'mon, admit it. I mean, as long as it's happening to somebody else – neither you nor I would ever be like that, would we? Or *would* we?

For the past several Sundays we have been reviewing the basic fundamentals of the Christian faith, and one of these that's been highlighted in the last two weeks especially is the total depravity of man. It's the truth that there is nothing good in us. We are not capable of doing anything meritorious or worthy in the sight of God. As the Scripture says, every inclination of our sinful hearts is only evil all the time. We are bad trees capable of producing only bad fruit. Our thoughts, actions, and desires are all completely corrupt so that in a moral sense it's accurate to say that there's nothing special about any one of us. In fact, we are all in a dead heat tie for the title "chief of sinners". And as Christians we'd all confess, "Yes, that's absolutely true".

And yet none of us really believes it completely. That's because all of us retain a sin nature that refuses to admit it. The sin nature in us continues to cling to the lie of our own inherent goodness and worth. So while we can say, "I am the chief of sinners" and mean it, we can still at the same time name in our hearts any number of people whom we feel that we are better than in a moral sense. And to the extent that we feel that way we are exactly like those pathetic contestants who are so convinced of their own talent that they argue with the judges and beg for another chance to prove themselves – except that we're doing it before God. We're telling him he's wrong about us. We're not as bad as he says. We really don't stink – or at least not as bad as everybody else. "Just give me another chance. I'll show you, Lord! I'm good. I'm somebody special."

It's *that* sinful nature in us, the part that believes that we're an exception to the rule, that we constantly have to be hunting down, putting the cross hairs on, and pulling the trigger. It needs to be killed wherever and as often as we find it because that's the part of us that contains the pride and the selfishness, it's the part of us that sits in judgment of others, it's the part of us that makes excuses for our own sinful behavior even while we condemn others; but most damning and destructive of all, it's the part of us that rejects the need for the Savior Jesus Christ. To the degree that I believe I'm special in God's sight – or that I ought to be special to him anyway – on account of my own intrinsic goodness, to that same degree I'm saying I don't need the righteousness

that Christ earned for me by his perfect life and death on the cross, and which he gives to me through faith in him.

Lack of self esteem is not anyone's problem. The problem is that we esteem ourselves way too highly. We need to make it our goal to extinguish the notion that "I'm somebody special" because then, in what is perhaps one of life's strangest ironies, by recognizing our sin and complete lack of worth in God's sight and trusting all the more in Jesus who gave his life for us we actually do become some **body** special – our value and worth made priceless not because of anything we have in and of ourselves; but rather because of what the Lord God invests in us.

We see this truth highlighted in two of today's readings. First in the Old Testament where the Lord speaks to his people after having delivered them from Egypt: What were they before? Slaves. The absolute bottom rung of society. They were nothing – nobody. No rights. No power. And no ability to do anything about it. That's what they were. But referring to his mighty acts of salvation, the Lord says to them, "You saw what I did for you, what I did to the Egyptians, and how I lifted you up as on eagle's wings and brought you to myself ... a treasured possession among all the world's people ... a kingdom of priests and a holy nation."

He says the same thing to you and me. What were we before? Sinners. Rebels against God. Bad trees bearing bad fruit and having the monumental gall to call it good. And without any power or desire to change ourselves. Worse than worthless, that's what we were. But he says, "You saw what I did for you, what I did to my Son who lived, suffered, and died on the cross for you, and how I lifted you up by my Holy Spirit and brought you to myself ... my treasured possession ... my own holy child. We heard him say that to young Noah today as he too was made a child of God as each of us were in our own baptisms. That's when we became somebody special: namely, a member of the body of Christ.

And I really do mean that we became *somebody* special by God's gracious action. This is shown in today's Gospel reading. First, we've got Jesus going throughout all the cities and villages proclaiming the Gospel of the kingdom and healing all the peoples' diseases and afflictions. The problems before him are huge: a mass of nameless, faceless suffering humanity ... sheep without shepherds ... lost ... *nobodies*—and that's what they would continue to be except for his work to save them. So, he calls his disciples together and he empowers them to assist him in his work. And what follows then are a list of their names. That's key – it's important that we not miss it. Who were these guys before Jesus chose them and called them to follow him? They were nobodies, just like everyone else. Ah, but now they're the *twelve disciples* of Jesus. They have real identities now. They have a real purpose. They've become somebodies. And their names are recorded for all eternity.

Again, the same is true of each of us. We were nobodies until Christ chose us and called us into discipleship – again, for most of us, at the time of our baptisms. That's when our names were recorded in the Lamb's Book of Life. That's a real identity, one that lasts forever. And maybe you know that it was the custom in earlier days not to name a child until the time of their baptism. That's when they were given their *Christian* name, so called because that's when they became *somebody* in Christ.

And just like he did with the original twelve disciples, he's given us more than an identity; he's also given us power and a purpose to assist him in his work of seeking and

saving the lost. Now, you might think, “No, wait a minute, they were given the power to perform miracles and cast out demons; I can’t do anything like that. So there’s no comparison.” I beg to differ. Jesus charged them first to proclaim the Gospel of the kingdom. That’s what delivers people from the bondage of sin and death and grants eternal life. It is by far the most important part of the mission – and there’s nothing stopping you from doing that. *Then* he said to do the other things to help people in need, “heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, cast out demons”, and okay, you may not have the power to do any of that; but why should that stop you from helping people in need with the powers that you have been given?

Going back to what he said to the Israelites, “I’ve appointed you a kingdom of priests”—that’s what we are: God’s priests. And a priest is somebody who represents the Lord to people and who intercedes for people to God. That’s what you are now. Wherever you go, whomever you meet, because you are a part of the body of Christ, you represent Christ to them. And until such time that they meet him themselves personally at the time of their conversion, you are the part of Christ they will see and hear. Take the job seriously – and let Judas’ bad example serve as a warning to you. He was chosen and empowered by Jesus too; but as you know, he fell down on the job – more concerned about feathering his own nest and looking out for number one than taking care of and serving others. And you see his problem was that he was counting as somebody special the part of him that he should have been seeking to destroy.

There’s a great little video clip I saw this last week on the internet called “Get Service”. It shows a guy on his way to work in the city. He grumbles about the neighbor kid on a skateboard who’s in his way when he’s pulling out of the driveway. He complains about the traffic. He’s irritated by the line at the coffee shop where he picks up his overpriced cappuccino, he’s annoyed by the slow service. One thing is clear: he feels he’s not being served as he should. He’s the most important guy in the world and everyone else is a nuisance. Anyway, while he impatiently waits for his coffee, suddenly this guy is standing before him presenting him with a case for glasses on which is written in big letters “Get Service”. He thinks, “Ah, that’s what I need”, so he takes it, opens the case, and puts the glasses on. He’s started to see that the guy who gave him the glasses has vanished, but as he looks around for him, he sees that everyone else has a little caption floating on them as if by magic. He begins to read them: On a man who had been in his way, “Recently lost his job”, on a harried looking woman, “Works two jobs to feed her kids”, on the employee who hands him his coffee, “Struggling with addiction”, on a man sitting alone in a booth, “Has never had a true friend”, on the woman who took the parking space he wanted, “Mourning the loss of a loved one”. Suddenly he saw that everyone around him were no longer nuisances, now they were opportunities to serve.

I won’t ruin it by telling you how it ends, but I think it illustrates precisely what I’ve been talking about today. As long as I think I’m somebody special, it’s all about me. When I see that I’m nobody, but that Christ counts me somebody special in him, then I can begin see others as Christ does: people with needs that I can do something about. I can serve them and in that way be Christ to them. And certainly, that’s Somebody special. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

***Soli Deo Gloria!***