

**“I Like My Shirt,”
November 8, 2009**

Message part 1

There’s a story about a guy who spent years evaluating life and his place in it. He finally emerged in a state of elation, and went to everyone he knew, and even to some he didn’t know, shouting, “I finally figured myself out! I’m in touch with my emotions! I know myself!”

One day in the midst of claiming his discovery, a stranger stopped him and asked, “What have you figured out?” “I am one with the world,” the guy exclaimed.

“You are one with the world?” the stranger repeated.

“You mean I’m not?” asked the guy.

I’d say right off hand that this guy has a problem with self-confidence, and it appears that all the study and introspection he had done hadn’t really gotten him very far. If it had, he probably wouldn’t have been so quick to doubt his discovery in the face of an innocent question.

I wonder how many of us can identify with the guy? I suspect most of us would have to admit to a sizable dose of self-doubt, or we probably aren’t human. And building self-confidence has a way of taking two steps forward, and then one step back. It seems that we never make all the headway we hope for because we are so often confronted with disbelief and discouragement, or challenged by the influence of others.

Many of us struggle with our self concept—never thinking we’re

good enough, and all it takes is someone confirming our worst fears for us to start cowering in a corner. I can only speak for myself, but I can tell you that this is something with which I have struggled. As I’ve mentioned before, I grew up on what many would refer to as the “wrong side of the tracks.” My parents were good people—very good people, but they were not the upper crust in my hometown. Yet in a rather small high school, I rubbed elbows with those who were worse off than we were, and with those who were better off—at least according to all outward appearances.

Through my church experience as a young teen, I got to be friends with some of those whose parents were the professionals in our town. Although we did things together, I never quite felt good enough to belong with them, and that was brought home to me after one certain experience in high school.

Our school had a sorority of sorts, and I was one of those invited to be “rushed” (I guess you’d say). Several of my friends were already in the group, so it was something I thought I needed and wanted to really fit in. However, I didn’t make it, and I was devastated! It really made a huge dent in any sense of confidence I ever had, and I began to question my worth, my value, even my so-called friendships with these other folks, and it took me quite a while to get past this.

Maybe you have had an experience similar to that, and if you have, you know that being told in one way or another that you’re not good

enough can hurt a lot. In my case, it altered my understanding of who I was at a time in my life when I guess I was particularly vulnerable. My response was to duck my head and pull back and play it safe; in some ways I pulled back from living life, unwilling to let the real me show, afraid of taking that risk.

Unfortunately, this kind of thing happens more than we would think. Not long ago, someone told me a story that made my heart ache. She said that one of their children was on a team, and wasn't playing very well during one of their games. Both parents were in attendance—at the start, but as their child kept playing the way that was short of their expectations, one parent became so disgusted that leaving the game was the only recourse.

I don't know for sure, but I'm guessing the child noticed the parent's departure, and I'll just bet the kid felt that not playing well meant not being good enough. After all, most of us want to please our parents when we were kids, maybe even when we're adults. We look for approval, and when we don't get it, we wonder about our self-worth.

Whether or not it's appropriate, many of us come to understand ourselves through the eyes of others, and affirmation or disappointment can make a huge impact. This is a lesson all of us who are parents, teachers, coaches need to remember. What we say or do means a lot to another person, and our actions have an influence, whether we are aware of it, or not.

Somehow we need to be able to grow past measuring ourselves through the estimate of someone

else, but that can be a long journey. In one of his books, Robert Fulghum talks about the change in our self-image and self-confidence as we grow older. He wrote about spending time in schools, and about the difference he had observed between kindergarteners and college-age students. He said if we ask a kindergarten class, "How many of you can draw?" every hand shoots up. "How many of you can sing? Again, every hand goes up. "How many of you can dance? Act in plays? With kindergarteners, the answer is "Yes!" Those young children are confident in spirit and believe they can do anything and everything. Everything still seems possible.

Now, ask those same questions in a college classroom, and see how many hands go up. Just a small percentage of students will raise their hands when asked if they can draw, or dance, or sing, or paint, or act, or play an instrument. When asked for more detail, a college student who raises his or her hand to any of the above questions will typically qualify their response to, "but I'm not very good at it," or "I used to play." Something has gone awry between the early years and young adulthood, and we can only assume that some of that lack of confidence continues and perhaps even worsens in our later years.

Message part 2

If we constantly hear that we're no good, or we're clumsy or awkward or stupid or unattractive, how do we overcome the feelings of insecurity and inadequacy? How can we begin

to like and respect ourselves? How can we become confident enough to be who we really are, and not always try to be like someone else? It's important, and if we're going to live our lives as God would have us live, we have to begin to accept and love ourselves.

I believe we take a big step when we begin to know ourselves, and accept our strengths and our challenges, the good and the not-so-good, the triumphs, as well as the failures. It can be scary. As Carl Jung said, "**The most terrifying thing is to accept oneself completely.**" And, indeed, it is hard to see ourselves as we really are, and be OK with that. But, you see, it's not about comparing ourselves with anyone else; it's not about being what our parents or our partner or our boss thinks we should be; it's about knowing who we are, and finding within us the courage to be that person. In today's lingo, it's being confident enough to say, "I like my shirt," even if no one else does.

How do we get there? You probably won't be surprised to hear that I think it has something to do with our faith, with our connection to God. It seems to me that, as our relationship with the source of all goodness and love grows, so does the possibility of changing what we believe about ourselves. After all, we're told in the Bible that we're made in the likeness of God; that means that we each have a spark of God-likeness within us—a spark of that goodness and love, a little piece of Godliness.

Sue Monk Kidd and her daughter, Ann Kidd Taylor, have written a book together that's entitled

Traveling with Pomegranates. Both of them tell of their spiritual journey and how intricately connected our self-understanding is with our spirituality. Sue shares something she learned from Thomas Merton's writing. She wrote, "**Merton had introduced me to what he called the True Self, referring to the God spark or divine nature in the human soul that's described by practically every mystical tradition in the world. If we could glimpse it, he wrote, 'we would see these billions of points of light coming together.'**" That's what it's like when we realize that there is a piece of God within us.

Jesus also told us that the second most important commandment, after loving God, is to love our neighbor as ourselves. We spend a lot of time sometimes talking about loving our neighbor, but we cannot neglect that Jesus reminded us of the importance of also loving ourselves, having positive self-esteem. It's like the instructions flight attendants give passengers before take-off: "In the unlikely event of loss of cabin pressure, an oxygen mask will fall from the overhead compartment. Place your own mask on first before helping another person." It has to start with us.

It starts within us, and leads us to a revised understanding of who we are. You see, I believe with all my heart that you and I are created by God; we're one of God's children, and part of God's family. God loves us totally and completely, just as we are, no strings attached. Jo Coudert said this: "**It is rewarding to find someone you like, but it is essential to like yourself. It is quickening to recognize that someone is a good**

and decent human being, but it is indispensable to view yourself as acceptable. It is a delight to discover people who are worthy of respect and admiration and love, but it is vital to believe yourself deserving of these things.” When that rings true at the very core of our being, it changes everything.

It changes everything because as we come to accept ourselves as one of God’s own children, we begin to grow in self confidence and realize that we can deal with whatever life deals us, because God is within us and surrounds us. That’s basically what Paul is saying in the passage from Ephesians that is our Bible verse for today. It reads like this: **“When we trust in God, we’re free to say whatever needs to be said, bold to go where we need to go.”**

Knowing that we have a piece of God within us gives us the power to live. It allows us to be who we

really are, and as someone has said, to **“Sing as if no one is listening. Love as if we’re never been hurt and dance as though no one is watching.”** May it be so.

Closing:

Elizabeth Kubler-Ross once said, **“People are like stained glass windows. They sparkle and shine when the sun is out, but when the darkness sets in, their true beauty is realized only if there is light from within.”**

As we leave here this morning, I hope and pray that we know the depth of God’s love for us, and that we will, indeed, let the light of God’s love shine forth from us!

Have a good Sunday, and go in peace. Amen.