

You and I Are Beautiful

There's an incredible story told by author Sharon Salzberg about her experiences with the current Dalai Lama. At a conference, the Dalai Lama was taking questions, all sorts of questions, with no particular topic being the focus. When it was her turn, she asked the Dalai Lama, 'What do you think about self-hatred?' Her narration of what follows is profoundly striking: 'The room went quiet as all of us awaited the answer of the Dalai Lama, revered leader of Tibetan Buddhism. Looking startled, he turned to his translator and asked pointedly in Tibetan again and again for an explanation. Finally, turning back to me, the Dalai Lama tilted his head, his eyes narrowed in confusion. 'Self-hatred?' he repeated in English. 'What is that'... That this man, whom we all recognized as having a profound psychological and spiritual grasp of the human mind, found the concept of self-hatred incomprehensible made us aware of how many of us found it all but unavoidable. During the remainder of the session, the Dalai Lama repeatedly attempted to explore the contours of self-hatred with us. At the end he said, "I thought I had a very good acquaintance with the mind, but now I feel quite ignorant. I find this very, very strange."

So many of us, in this day and age, live with a profound dissatisfaction with ourselves, with a much-too-focused awareness of our faults, that it becomes easy to lapse into the very self-hatred that the Dalai Lama found so perplexing. We live in a culture that teaches us, both implicitly and explicitly, to be unsatisfied with ourselves, our bodies, our personalities, our vocations...all of the things that collectively define who we are. For the Dalai Lama, who comes out of a religious tradition that quotes one of its teachers as having said, "You could search the whole world over and never find anyone as deserving of your love as yourself," the concept of

self-hatred was foreign. But for us, who live with the constant idol of ‘improvement’, ‘perfection, ‘advancement’, it is an inescapable reality.

Though not corresponding exactly to the modern concept of self-hatred, I remain fascinated by the Hebrew people’s response to the revelation of God on Mt. Sinai and the giving of the Ten Commandments: *“When all the people witnessed the thunder and lightning, the sound of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking, they were afraid and trembled and stood at a distance, and said to Moses, ‘You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, or we will die’.”* Having just witnessed an amazing revelation...a revelation that set the heavens ablaze with glory and power, the people have found it nearly impossible to remain near this mountain...to remain near the unfolding of God’s presence. *“They were afraid and trembled...”* Certainly, I can imagine myself being filled with fear, trembling before such a grand and mighty revelation, but, there is something unique about the Israelites’ fear and trembling. Just before this revelation, Moses was speaking to the people the words the LORD had spoken to him. And upon receiving these words, upon receiving the commands of the LORD their God, they collectively respond, *“Everything that the LORD has spoken, we will do.”* Having been consecrated as a holy people, we are then told that *“Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God. They took their stand at the foot of the mountain.”* These people have already been claimed by God. They desired to do what the LORD has commanded. And they have taken their place at the foot of the mountain. Yet, once the glory of the LORD was revealed, they could no longer stand before the LORD’s greatness. They could not bear to hear the LORD’s voice. They trembled in fear and stepped away from this revelation. As it were, a great spiritual distance is thrown up between the people and the LORD and, as one author puts it, *“The people [beseeched Moses] that he act as mediator. ‘Let God speak through you. We are no longer able to bear God’s speaking lest we perish’.”*

Whether it was a heightened awareness of their sinfulness or their shortcomings, or simply because their minds couldn't grasp the fullness of God's glory, the people became afraid of such intimacy, such proximity, such closeness with God. Aware of their own finite mortality before God's infinite greatness, they could stand only to deal with God's mediator, God's go-between. As I said before, this isn't a direct correlation to our modern phenomenon of self-hatred, but in my experience, self-hatred, or an intense awareness of our own faults, sins, and shortcomings results in many of the same actions and attitudes. We grasp the goodness and glory of God, which far exceeds anything we are capable of, and we then become convinced that we are not worthy to bear witness to God's revelation, that we will never be worthy to have such an intimate connection to God. Perhaps we become convinced that God isn't interested in sharing such intimate connections with us. It becomes all too easy to shrink back from God, to tremble with real fear before God. Rather than causing us to celebrate with joy, a revelation of and an encounter with God's goodness produces fear, and an awareness of our unworthiness. We are human, all too human. What could God possibly want with us?

There's an answer to that question, and Paul's letter to the Philippians gives it with power and eloquence. Whereas the Israelites' fear of God's revelation caused them to seek separation, to stand at a distance, wishing to not even hear the voice of God, Paul's understanding of relating with God, as a result of God's revelation in Christ, is fundamentally different: *"I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord...I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death."* The Israelites feared this great distance, and sought to install a mediator between them and God, to not even hear God's voice. Yet Paul, having had a firsthand experience of the beauty and grandeur of God in Christ, sought to "know Christ", counting every other thing in the world, all of his stature and all of his achievements, as a loss because he was able to "know Christ", to engage intimately and deeply with him. It was just last week that we

heard Paul's hymn-like reflections on the incarnation, and his words bear repeating again: *"Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross."*

In Jesus of Nazareth, the gulf between humanity and divinity was abolished. The very flesh of Jesus, infused with the fullness of God. The God who called the universe into being, who guided single-cells to become living and breathing creatures, whose holiness and purity once caused a people to stand back in fear, that same God, in Christ Jesus, knew what it meant to be rejected. This same God felt the very same pains of hunger you and I feel, felt the very same longing for acceptance and affirmation, felt the trickle of sweat down a cheek. This great, wide chasm between humanity and divinity is gone. And Paul's words to us this morning reveal something more. The ability to move beyond the human-divine barrier is no longer the exclusive property of God. Through the incarnation of God in Christ, humanity has been infused with the potential to *"know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings"* for, as Paul says it, *"Christ Jesus has made me his own."* And we can say the very same thing. *"Christ Jesus has made us his own."*

We need not fear the things about ourselves we may hate. We need not shrink back in fear before the holiness of God, because we have been invited to participate in that holiness. We can stand, not at a distance, but with the closeness of a friend, or better yet, the closeness of a lover. For *"Christ Jesus has made us his own."*