

PRIDE GOETH WHITHER?

A Sermon by Fritz Hudson

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If you've been among us for awhile, you've joined me vicariously on several pilgrimages – to Jesus' Jerusalem, to the Buddha's Bodh Gaya, to Channing's & Emerson's Boston. This past June I made a kind of accidental pilgrimage. I was really just on my way home from our General Assembly, in Portland, Oregon. At the time, our daughter Sally was just settling into her summer job in San Francisco, however. So I arranged my flights to make a one-day stop-over there. That day happened to be June 24th, the last Sunday in June. And that Sunday, for 38 years now, has been Gay Pride Day. Gay Pride in San Francisco! Mecca, eat your heart out! With Sally's apartment an easy walk from the Civic Center Plaza, we took it all in: the parade, the booths, the shows, the food - and of course the people. Perhaps you've seen pictures: outlandishly colorful costumes, square yards of bare skin stretched over impressive musculature or glands, exuberant, demonstrative behavior. Those indices of pride we saw by the carload. But if you discount the crowd hazards - being poked by a passing foot-long eyelash or spiked under a misplaced five-inch heel - it did us no harm. It was fun. Everyone was smiling, laughing. Was there "sin" in that pride? Or was there perhaps rather even "salvation?"

Throughout human history, religious teachers have condemned pride with virtual unanimity. "If I had only one sermon to preach it would be a sermon against pride," G.K. Chesterton wrote in the last century. He would have stood in a very long line.

- "Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall," says the Jewish Book of Proverbs.(16:18-19).

- The Quran, in the sura called "the wise," proclaims: "Swell not your cheek for pride at men . . . for the harshest of sounds without doubt is the braying of the ass." (31:18ff)

- In the Hindu Vedantic scripture "Srimhad Bhagavatam it's written:

"Shun all pride . . . Give up all idea of 'me' and 'mine'." (11:4)

- And in the Sutta Nipata, "A questioner asks: 'I would like to know about the state of peace. . . How does a person become calm?'

And the Buddha responds, 'A person does this by eradicating the delusion of 'I am.' . . . For when a person is quiet within, the self cannot be found. . . . He has let go the foundation of self and no longer builds up pride.'"

In the Christian tradition, by the 4th Century after Jesus' death, pride had been placed among the seven deadly sins. In some writings it has become understood as the root cause of all human iniquity.

At the very least one might take a deep breath before challenging such a panel of judgment. (Breath). O.K. then. Here we go.

What I want to say this morning is that this time-honored judgment is not wrong. But it is widely wrongly understood. I can't speak from knowledge of the original words translated as pride in

each of these texts. But our word pride has a very broad reach. Its meaning stretches between two poles. Its moral hue changes depending which pole is closer to our intent.

The center of pride's meaning is a positive feeling about one's self or one's accomplishments. But in only one direction from that center does pride lead to destruction, toward a fall. In the other direction it leads toward creation. It goeth there, not "before a fall". You could say "It goeth before all." And what's important for us is to learn to feel the little ridge that separates the two hemispheres of pride – and to keep our positive feelings about ourselves magnetized to its creative pole. It is important for us as individuals. And it is important for us as a spiritual community.

From the center, from our positive feeling about our self or our accomplishments, we can go toward exaggeration. We can overestimate the value of our gifts or our accomplishments. At the pole of this direction are the synonyms "conceit" and "vanity." Going there takes us out of touch with reality.

From that same center, however, we can also go in the other direction, toward "self-acceptance" and "self-respect." We can get a firmer grasp on our actual capacities, particularly if they've been cruelly squelched. At the pole of this direction are the synonyms "courage" and "self-confidence." It can put us in touch with a deeper reality, however unsuspected.

So let's start feeling for that ridge in the middle, the watershed which sends us toward one pole or the other. Henry Fairlie, in his book The Seven Deadly Sins Today, leads us toward it.

He's writing about pride as sin. He says,

- "The proud man sets himself up and, in doing so, sets himself apart." (p.41)
- "This withdrawal may take many forms:
 - the intellectual who 'retreats from the mediocrities of mass culture into the inner community of taste.'
 - the liberal who 'retreats from the moral failures of those who are wielders of power into the inner community of criticism and virtue;
 - the reactionary who 'retreats into impossible dreams about a bygone past to escape contact with and responsibility for the present.'
 - the academic who 'retreats from the simplicities of the common life into the complexities of his expertise' (William F. May quoted in Fairlie p.45).

Pride at its sinful pole is not just exaggeration, not just conceit or vanity. It is also haughtiness, arrogance. Many of the scriptures speak of it as "puffing up." Dorothy Sayers gets at the real perversion of its power. She observes, "The devilish strategy of Pride is that it attacks us, not in our weakest points, but in our strongest. It is preeminently the sin of the noble mind." (quoted in Fairlie. p.43)

And I've got a pretty good illustration of just what she means. It's from the world of religion itself. It's the story, among Jews, of the High Holy Day services where the rabbi suddenly is suddenly possessed by a wave of mystical rapture. He throws himself onto the ground before the Holy Torah. He proclaims, "Lord, I am Nothing."

The Cantor is standing next to him. The Rabbi's example moves him into rapture. He, too, throws himself down before the Torah. And he too proclaims, "Lord, I am Nothing."

Then way in the back of the synagogue there's the Janitor. Watching his spiritual leaders fall on the floor, he catches their spirit. He throws himself on the floor. He shouts, "Lord, I am Nothing."

But up in the front, the Rabbi turns his head, back down the aisle to where the Janitor lies. He looks over at the Cantor. And then he whispers, "Look who thinks *he's* nothing."

In the classic western traditions - among Jews, Christians, Muslims – pride is the sin of the devil himself. It is the presumption that one can contend with Yahweh, Allah, God. In the eastern traditions – among Hindus, Buddhists – pride is the separation of one's self from the cosmic unity, the Om. Across the spectrum, the sin of pride is setting oneself up as unconnected to any greater power beyond your own. In our faith, some will sense this connection in similar cosmic or mystical terms. But we all can simply speak of this sin as alienating ourselves from one another, from the very real transcending power of the human community.

The ridge that separates the two poles of pride, the divide that sends our positive feelings about ourselves toward sin or toward salvation, is the answer to simple questions: Do they lead us away from, apart from, one another? Down that path lies sin. Or could they lead us toward one another, into closer human communion? If so, I think, such pride could be our salvation.

Over the past few months in particular, I've been trying to imagine how we might better fulfill our covenant as a community – how we can better affirm the worth of every person, how we can better encourage each other's spiritual growth. In this quest some recent publications have led me (finally) to become better acquainted with the work of one of our community's leading, though now late, citizens. Most of you know his name – Don Clifton. He died in 2003, by then as Chief Executive Officer of the Gallup Organization. He began his life here many years before as UNL Professor of Educational Psychology. His career-long interest was in how people develop strengths, and how organizations can maximize the product of their members' strengths. In a nutshell, Clifton's contention was that strengths arise only when knowledge and skill are acquired to focus the power of natural talents. The important first step toward having strengths, therefore, is to identify talents. Clifton described talents as "naturally recurring patterns of thought, feeling or behavior that can be productively applied."

So I'm curious now, how many of you have taken Gallup's on-line "strength finder" interview to identify your five signature talent themes? (25-30 attenders indicated they had.) Just so we all understand, Don Clifton's research claims to have identified 34 kinds of talents – 34 different patterns of thought, feeling or behavior that can be productively applied. If you answer a 180 question interview, choosing between each pair of the offered self-descriptions the side which

seems more true of you, he claimed, five of these patterns will emerge as the "signature themes of your talent." They're the raw material, he says, from which your strengths can be developed.

To have value, it seems to me, this theory must pass two tests.

First, it must accurately identify real talents – real patterns that can be productively applied. In my case, the themes identified my patterns feel familiar. None of them feel foreign. A few more among the 29 not identified as mine might also feel familiar, but most of them feel less so. I can accept them as not my talents.

The second test is whether these talents, once focused through acquired knowledge and skills, actually do make me a more productive person.

But here is where our struggle with pride is engaged – where we need to find that all-important ridge. One of my Gallup publications says: "When we discover our talents, when we give them a name, something resonates deep within us. It is as if our spirits react to this discovery with a resounding "Yes!"

We find it somehow freeing; naming our greatest talents set us free to develop them and live through them. Naming our top talents gives us permission to accept our areas of lesser talent and either discard them or manage them. It gives us permission to stop trying to be who we are not and concentrate on who we are." (Al Winseman. Living Your Strengths. p.8)

This jubilation recalls for me its dark mirror image. It appears in the Hassidic Jewish story of Rabbi Zusya, who is looking forward to his life's end. "In the coming world," says the Rabbi, "they will not ask me: 'Why were you not Moses?' They will not ask me why were you not Isaiah. Or why were you not Daniel. My great fear is that they will ask me, 'Why were you not Zusya.'" (adapted from Martin Buber. Tales of the Hasidim: The Early Masters. p.251)

To be ourselves – to use well the unique gifts with which we have been endowed – that is our salvation. And, in this quest, feeling the pride that connects us to courage and self-confidence is the very Holy Spirit. But to develop these gifts, these talents, requires more than the acquisition of knowledge and of skills. It requires the support of a community – a group of fellow strength-seekers that can give us feedback on our progress. The shaping of our strengths requires others who actually receive and value the product of our efforts – and who tell us so directly.

And here's the real kicker. The only way there will ever be such a community for us – the only way we will ever get the support to develop our strengths from our talents – is if each of us plays our part in forming such a community for others. Our elation, our exhilarating freedom, at owning and giving ourselves to our greatest talents may lead us to discard or manage our lesser talents. But, but it cannot lead us to discount those talents – because each of our lesser talents are the greatest talents for someone else. To get our own talents recognized and our own strengths developed by others, we must learn to recognize and value the talents of others. If Don Clifford's research is valid, our strength comes only in recognizing and helping develop the talents

not ours. In other words, in words actually, we are called in this way to live out our affirmation of the interdependence of our human existence.

In the Qur'an, in the sura called "the clot", it is written
"verily man transgresses all bounds
For he thinks of himself as self-sufficient" (96:6ff)

This is the core sin of pride. South African Bishop Desmond Tutu makes the sin clearer when he writes, "The completely self-sufficient person would be subhuman." (sub-human, he says, though our prideful culture almost forces us to assume he said super-human.) What does it take to escape this sin. Bishop Tutu is forced outside of our English, to the Nguni group of languages, to explain it to us. The word it requires is *ubuntu*. He writes:

"*Ubuntu* is very difficult to render into a Western language. It speaks of the very essence of being human. When we want to give high praise to someone we say, 'Hey, so-and-so has *ubuntu*.' You are generous, you are hospitable . . . You share what you have. It is to say, 'My humanity is caught up, is inextricably bound up, in yours.' . . . We say, 'A person is a person through other persons.' It is not 'I think therefore I am.' It says rather: 'I am human because I belong. I participate. I share.' A person with *ubuntu* is open and available to others, affirming of others, does not feel threatened that others are able and good, for he or she has a proper self-assurance that comes from knowing that he or she belongs to a greater whole." (No Future Without Forgiveness)

Ubuntu, in Nguni, I believe, in English, is what I've been calling "the pride which leads to salvation." It is not unknown in our religious heritage. That most Christian of Christians, Paul of Tarsus, definitely saw the sin of pride in his fellow churchmen in Corinth. He railed at them for the arrogant boasting among them over who had the greatest spiritual gifts. It threatened to tear their community apart. But, he wrote them, still "I have great confidence in you. I have great pride in you." (2nd letter 7:4)

I couldn't tell for sure, in San Francisco. I was a passer through, on the outside looking in. I can only hope that the spirit of that pride there in "Mecca" fell on the side of the ridge I've known it hold on Gay Pride days here in Lincoln – that it is magnetized to the pole, not of destructive self-sufficiency, but of creative community.

We too, as a church, have to meet that same challenge. Our self-study consultant, Nancy Heege, put it to us in her report from this pulpit just two months ago. She asked: "What would you like to be proud of?" May our answer be our salvation.