
I Have Called You By Name; You Are Precious to Me

Complementary to understanding the human person as the image of God is the moral vision of the covenant. The claims that we make about who we ought to be as the image of God presuppose a way of relating to God and to one another. The covenant describes that relationship. It is a relationship of God's faithful abiding love for us inviting a like response from us. Because the covenant is a complex reality with many aspects, I am necessarily being selective in these next three chapters when I hold up as especially informative of the good life only three features of covenantal life—worth, solidarity, and fidelity. This chapter will reflect on covenantal love that establishes our worth and its corresponding virtue—self-esteem.

Worth

Our hearts hunger for love. We have a passionate longing to know that we count in the eyes of someone special.

We long to know that we are loved and valued and are the source of delight for another. Our anger, hatred, and fear are inverted desires for a love that we have not been able to receive. "Do you love me?" is the persistent cry of the heart. We ask it not just of people significant to us but ultimately of God. Through the covenant, God responds to this cry of the heart's longing for worth with a firm "yes." "I have called you by name, you are mine....I will give up whole nations to save your life, because you are precious to me and because I love you and give you honor" (Is 43:1, 4).

The covenant recalls that grace is the first move. We are not so much the searchers as the ones searched for. Because God has taken the initiative to enter into covenant with us, we matter to God in a most serious way. Such love bestows worth. Our worth is first given to us; then it is claimed (Our true, ultimate worth comes primarily from God's loving us, and not from our personal achievements or social roles.)

In the New Testament, one of the favorite images of Jesus for those whose lives are grounded in God's unconditional love is the child. When Jesus is asked who is the greatest in God's reign, he reaches into the crowd, sets a child beside him, and says, in effect, "Unless you become like this, you will never understand greatness" (cf. Mt 18:1-5). What makes the child such an apt image is that the child's worth and security are grounded in the generous love of the parents and not in something the child has achieved. That is what we are like before God. We are grounded in a love that desires us out of the abundance of love itself and not because of anything we may have accomplished.

Our fundamental, biblically informed insight is that our worth and security are grounded in the unconditional love of God. Yet, whom do we let name us? To whom do we feel we really belong? There are so many voices wanting to claim us. To whom do we listen?

Before Jesus began his public ministry he was tempted in the desert by seductive voices full of promise (Mt 4:1-11). These voices promised him security if he could prove his worth by being successful, popular, and powerful. Such promises are indeed seductive for anyone who would doubt his or her own goodness and worth. Jesus was able to resist the temptations because he heard in the center of his heart the voice of love that named him and defined his mission. He believed in the word of divine love and lived true to its liberating power.

The voices that surround us today try to convince us that we are not good but that we can become good if we succeed at a few things. In a world that constantly compares, it is hard to believe that there is a love that does not do the same. In a culture that raises trophy children and is full of grades, scores, ranks and statistics, it is hard to believe that there is love that does not measure us one against the other. The love that compares is a love filled with *ifs*. You are a person of worth if you are educated, if you have a good job, if you accumulate wealth, power, position, and prestige. These endless *ifs* only enslave us. We can give freely what we have freely received only when we know ourselves to be fully accepted by a love that makes no conditions. But so much of our love is compromised by conditions. No wonder we need a special word to describe the love for which we long. We call it unconditional love. Only love without ★ conditions communicates the love we long for.

The conditions that compromise love make us doubt that our worth is grounded in a love beyond measure. So we reach for our trophies, name our triumphs, or cite our awards to say, "See, I am worthy of love." Without being grounded in a love beyond measure, we become swamped by so many needs and wants that we become suspicious of every voice. We wonder if anyone truly loves us. What might be generosity seems like manipulation. We don't

want to be used. We wonder if we ourselves can love. What looks like an offer of love is really a cry for affection—do you love me? But when we discover that our true nature is to be loveable and loving, then we can embrace the whole world in freedom and without fear. (When we accept ourselves as people who are already loved the way God loves us—completely and unconditionally—then we can give to others what they need without manipulating them in order to win love in return.)

Self-Esteem

In our fragmented world, we are so keenly aware of the lack of love and the abundance of hatred, cruelty, and indifference that prevails. Not being able to hear the voice of love that grounds our worth only spells tragedy for living the good life. Self-esteem is the virtue by which we accept ourselves as being worthwhile apart from our achievements. It is a principal virtue that makes the good life possible. One of the greatest things we can do for others is to like ourselves, to really enjoy being who we are and doing what we can. That takes a healthy sense of self. That takes hearing the voice of unconditional love, believing it to be true, and then living in ways that show that we like what we have heard and have come to know.

The image we have of ourselves is largely a product of what others have told us that we are. The IRS knows me by my social security number. I have no personality. The company says that I am an employee. There I am valued for what I do. The kids say that I am an old man or an old lady. For them I am out of touch and out of joint. The image we have of ourselves will show up in our conduct, for we tend to shape our behavior out of the way we are named or labeled. Names that affirm (you are the sunshine of my life)

call forth the best in us, whereas names that condemn or put down (you are such a jerk) have the opposite effect. So, for the good life, it makes a great deal of difference how others relate to us, how they name us, what image we have of ourselves as a result, and how we value ourselves in that image. Another's esteem for us nurtures self-esteem.

The familiar fairy tale of Rapunzel can be taken as a story about self-image, its sources, and its effects on our conduct. It shows us that how we see ourselves in the eyes of another is a crucial part of self-esteem. In this story a young girl with long hair is imprisoned in a tower with an old witch. The girl is really very beautiful, but the witch consistently tells her that she is ugly. That is the witch's strategy to keep the girl inside. Rapunzel is imprisoned not so much by the tower but by the fear of her own ugliness that the witch keeps before her. Rapunzel's liberation comes when she lets down her hair to the young prince below who recognizes her beauty, names it for her, and by this sets her free. Not until Rapunzel sees in the mirror of the prince's eyes that she is beautiful—and accepts what she sees—can she free herself from the imprisonment of her self-image as ugly and unwanted.

Now, contrast the story of Rapunzel with the experience expressed by Ysaye Maria Barnwell in her song, "No Mirrors in My Nana's House." In this song, a black woman sings of seeing the beauty of everything, especially herself, through her Nana's eyes. Without mirrors, she can only see herself the way her Nana tells her that she is. In her Nana's eyes, her black skin, her flat nose, and her frumpy, baggy clothes are all beautiful. Through her Nana's eyes, she lives in a kind of magical world where she only knows love. She doesn't know hate.

Sadly, however, not many people can sing this song as their own. Coming to a sense of self through the eyes of unconditional love has not been everyone's experience. We

feel valuable when we know someone loves us. Too many, unfortunately, live unsure that they are loved as they are. "I hate myself" is their prevailing attitude. They live burdened by an abiding sense that they are not worth much to anyone, not even to themselves.

Then there are those who have a sense of self-worth, but they know how fragile this gift is. They can easily feel bad about themselves because they have not done enough to measure up, or they might believe that whatever they have done has been filled only with mistakes. Rather than accept the fact that mistakes are an inevitable part of everyone's life, they can easily make them the measure of their worth and so erode their self-esteem.

Many factors can account for making low self-esteem the rule rather than the exception in people's lives. What becomes a person's self-esteem is developed primarily through relationships, especially our most influential ones. That is why a smile of recognition and a kind word of affirmation are so important. If love can build up, cruelty, unkindness, inattention can bruise deeply, or even destroy. Horror stories abound of parents who did not give to children the affirmation and encouragement they needed, of teachers who mistreated them, or of friends who betrayed them. Their lives are filled more with criticism and rejection than with encouragement and acceptance. They can easily identify with Vivian's feelings in the film *Pretty Woman*. After telling of how her mother mistreated her as a child by locking her in the attic as a punishment, Vivian says, "When people put you down enough, you start to believe it. The bad stuff is easier to believe."

Low self-esteem may also result from being subjected to prejudice and oppression within society when, for example, male dominated structures do not honor women's gifts or when Caucasian-dominated structures oppress people of color. A lack of self-esteem can also contribute to unrealized

hopes, undiscovered talents, unborn dreams. In the movie *Shirley Valentine*, we see this played out in the life of the protagonist. In one scene, as she sits by the seaside in Greece, reflecting on her own life and how little and unused it has been, Shirley says, "I've allowed myself to lead a little life while inside me there is so much more...it's gone unused and now it never will be. Why do we get all this life if we never use it? Why do we get all these feelings and dreams and hopes if we don't ever use them?"

Religious preaching and teaching can also impede our quest for self-esteem. Our beliefs about God correlate with our self image. What image of God do you carry around? Where did you get it? Most of us have picked up our images of God from the way we have been taught about God, especially through the way we have been treated in the name of God and according to God's will. Our images of God are hard to shake. They seem to have embedded themselves in the elusive corners of our subconscious and continue to influence our convictions about God and about ourselves. They especially influence our feeling for what it is like to live in relationship to God, and they affect our attitudes toward the moral life as well.

So we need to examine our images of God for their influence on our self-esteem. Before we can begin to experience the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Jesus, we must destroy our whole pantheon of false gods and distorted images. We all have them. We have all burned incense at the shrines of our favorite gods. An all-time favorite god was portrayed several years ago in one of the main characters in the film *Cool Hand Luke*. In this film, prisoners put to work on the chain gang are governed by Boss Godfrey, an expressionless man who hides behind dark glasses. He never speaks, but he does carry a big stick and a rifle. Boss Godfrey has absolute power over the life and death of the men on the chain gang. The image of God that he portrays

is that of a distant god who keeps book on us and waits for us to trip up so that we can be marked as a loser. This god threatens to imprison us in hell if we get out of line. If we perceive God like that, then surely we will have a hard time maintaining self-esteem.

But what if one's image of God were more like that played by George Burns in the film *Oh, God*? There we have a fun-loving old man joining in the affairs of life in such a delightful way. The self-esteem influenced by an image of a friendly, loving, close God would be more positive and the moral life less rigid than that supported by the image of a "gotcha" God and a perfectionistic moral life.

However, in our quest for self-esteem, we don't want to go to the extreme of denying any evil in ourselves. Common experience reminds us that our lives are a tangled web of good and evil. The uncanny insight of my five-year-old niece revealed this basic truth. I asked her once what color she would be if all good people in the world were painted blue and all the bad people were painted yellow. She thought for a moment and then matter of factly said, "I'd be streaky." She said what is true about us all. We are all streaky. There is some good in the worst of us and some evil in the best of us. In the depths of our hearts, we do battle with these conflicting tendencies. Because sin can be really within us and is really around us, we will never achieve total personal integration in this life. But we also believe that these dark forces are always encompassed by a greater power of good. This is the power of the unconditional love of God that sustains us and accepts us even when we feel unacceptable.

To deny or ignore our original blessing, to live with low or no self-esteem, only imprisons us in a defensive fear. Anger, resentment, jealousy, revenge, rivalry, and hoarding greed are all signs that we are deaf to the love that grounds us. Not sure that we are loved, we have to attack, put

down, or dominate others in order to assure ourselves of the love we think we deserve.

Sin shows itself in our lives when we try to establish our worth on the basis of surrogate loves that we create to give us the security of being loveable and acceptable independent of God's love. These surrogate loves may be our talent, our goodness, our efficiency, our charm, our wit, our bright ideas, our wealth, our social position and prestige. But displacing divine love with these surrogate loves is nothing less than idolatry.

When we so fill up our lives with these idols of self-created loves, we have no room for divine love. The four blessings and the four woes of Luke (6:20-26) speak to this condition quite starkly. What is it about the poor, the hungry, the weeping and the rejected that they should receive a blessing, whereas those who are rich, filled, happy, and praised receive a curse? To be poor, hungry, weeping, and rejected are blessings of the reign of God because people in these conditions know they cannot establish themselves on any grounds of their own; rather, they rely totally on being supported by a love which comes to them out of its own abundance and not out of their own boasting or achievement. On the other hand, the rich, the filled, the happy, and the praised have no room in their lives for such love. They are filled already by their own achievements and, hanging on to these achievements as their sole source of security, are unable to surrender to divine love.

Not until we let go of these surrogate loves will we be free to surrender to the deepest truths about ourselves as being grounded in divine love. But letting go is hard. We hang on to these surrogate loves out of fear that if we let go we will lose our worth and no longer be valued or valuable. As long as we establish our worth in surrogate loves, we are not free. We remain trapped in the self-absorbing fear that believes that we are not loveable as we are. This

fear and lack of freedom drives us to strive for qualities and achievements with which to exalt ourselves and oppress others. This only results in the self-righteousness that Jesus singles out as the obstacle to hearing the good news that our worth is grounded in God's love and not our own. We pronounce a judgment against ourselves when we refuse to accept this divine love as our only true source of worth and security. Not until we open ourselves to the source of our worth in God will we be open to the wider values of God's creation and God's people.

Strengthening Self-Esteem

(To live the good life, we must accept our original blessing—God's love as the ground of our worth.) Here is one of my favorite stories of accepting God's love. The old man in this story is well on his way to seeking the fulfillment of the good life because he knows that he is loved.

One evening as the priest walked along the country road he came across an old man also out enjoying the twilight air. They walked and talked together until a sudden rain made them take shelter. When their conversation moved into silence, the old Irishman took his little prayer book and began praying half aloud. The priest watched him a long while, then in a quiet whisper said, "You must be very close to God!" The old man smiled very deeply and answered, "Yes! He is very fond of me!"¹

Yes, God is very fond of us! More important, each of us needs to be able to say with this old man, "God is very fond of me!" But that may be our most difficult act of faith. It is indeed a great act of faith to believe that God is love. But it is an even greater act of faith to believe that God loves me! Why do we resist letting God love us? Is it that we do to

God what we do to others who say they love us? We want to know why. We tie their love to some quality we possess, some achievement we have done, some virtue we have acquired. We end up making their love another product we have produced. With God, we do not have to do anything as much as we have to stop doing things.

Perhaps many of us identify more easily with the peasant woman in *The Brothers Karamazov* than we do with this old man. In Dostoyevsky's novel, Father Zossima speaks these words to a penitent woman who could not let go of her sin and accept God's healing and liberating love:

Fear nothing and never be afraid. And don't worry. If only your penitence fail not, God will forgive all. There is no sin, and there can be no sin on all the earth, which the Lord will not forgive to the truly repentant! Man cannot commit a sin so great as to exhaust the infinite love of God. Can there be a sin which could exceed the love of God? Think only of repentance, continual repentance, but dismiss fear altogether. Believe that God loves you as you cannot conceive; that He loves you with your sin, in your sin. It has been said of old that over one repentant sinner there is more joy in heaven than over ten righteous men. Go, and fear not. Be not bitter against men. Be not angry if you are wronged. Forgive the dead man in your heart what wrong he did you. Be reconciled with him in truth. If you are penitent, you love. And if you love you are of God. All things are atoned for, all things are saved by love. If I, a sinner even as you are, am tender with you and have pity on you, how much more will God have pity upon you. Love is such a priceless treasure that you can redeem the whole world by it, and cleanse not only your own sins but the sins of others.²

Father Zossima knew that repentance or accepting the gift of grace, of God's freely loving us, is the beginning of living the good life. God's love for us is the foundation on

which the whole of the moral life rests. God loves us, all of us, without reservation. This is the basic fact of the moral life. We must never be willing to negotiate or compromise it. God never stops loving us. God loves us when we are in sin just as much as when we are out of sin. We cannot win God's love. We cannot lose God's love. But we are free to receive God's love or not. Even so, we could not even use this freedom unless God continued to love us. God is forever loving us. All we need to do is to live out of this love. Knowing that we are accepted by God and that God will never abandon us gives us unending courage to live morally day by day in friendship with God and with one another.

We all need to find ways to assimilate and reinforce this fundamental biblical insight about God's love for us. The scriptures never tire of repeating the word of God's love. The prophets extol God's love; Jesus lived by the truth of this word; and St. Paul spoke about its truth out of the depth of his experience. It is helpful for building self-esteem to develop the discipline of meditating on positive biblical stories and images that help us to understand divine love as our true source of worth and our only security. For example, try these. Listen to God say, "I love you":

Do not be afraid....I have called you by name—you are mine....You are precious to me....I love you....Do not be afraid—I am with you (Is 43:1-5).

Even if a mother should forget her child, I will never forget you....I have written your name in the palms of my hands (Is 49:15-16).

How can I give you up? How can I abandon you?...My heart will not let me do it! My love for you is too strong....I, the Holy One, am with you (Hos 11:8-9).

I love you just as the Father loves me; remain in my love (John 15:9).

For I am certain that nothing can separate us from his love: neither death nor life, neither angels nor other heavenly rulers or powers, neither the present nor the future, neither the world above nor the world below—there is nothing in all creation that will ever be able to separate us from the love of God which is ours through Christ Jesus our Lord (Rom 8:38–39).

If we are deaf to these words of love, then the burdens of self-doubt about our worth may overwhelm us and the hunger of our hearts to know that we count in the eyes of someone special may never be ultimately satisfied.

Spiritual Exercises

- ◆ In a quiet place, repeat the title of this chapter, "I have called you by name; you are precious to me," as your mantra, or breath prayer. Rest with this for a moment.
- ◆ Slowly read the scripture texts listed at the end of the chapter. Listen to God say, "I love you."
- ◆ So much of who we are is the handiwork of friends. Who are the people who have had the greatest influence on you? Recall your concentric circles from the last chapter? What names have those on the innermost circle given you? (For example, the family of a friend of mine has given her the name Sunshine because of how she lights up their life.) Let these names come. Spend time with them. Speak the names softly. What feelings accompany each name? What is the central conviction each name holds for you?

- Notice the kind of people you have in the innermost circles. What do they have that you would like to have? What makes you think that you do not already have it? What advantage would you have for being like them? What disadvantage are you suffering for not being like them?

- We all have had some experience that we regard as a mistake or even a failure. These can bruise our self-esteem. Reimagine that experience. Allow God to talk to you about it.

- Accepting God's love for us is the foundation of the good life. What images of God have you held that blocked you from accepting God's love? What images of God are liberating for you? Perhaps you may want to draw your image of God. What biblical story best expresses your image of God? Pray with that text slowly. This chapter includes lyrics from a song. Do you have a song or poem that expresses your experience or hope of love? Sing it, play it, or read it to your sharing group.