

Thieves and Robbers Series:
“SELF-PITY”

Scripture lesson: Exodus 4:10-17

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John Quincy Adams held more important offices than anyone else in the history of the U.S. He served with distinction as president, senator, congressman, minister to major European powers, and participated in various capacities in the American Revolution, the War of 1812, and events leading to the Civil War. Yet, at age 70, with much of that behind him, he wrote, "My whole life has been a succession of disappointments. I can scarcely recollect a single instance of success in anything that I ever undertook."

Imagine after living a life filled with that much accomplishment, feeling that defeated, that disappointed, empty, feeling that your life had not counted for much of worth. And yet, it happens. Despite everything that we might accomplish externally – out in the world – what we feel like in here – inside – can be very different. We can do much that is worthwhile, and yet, still feel worthless. We can have a wall full of decorations, and yet, feel defective.

In John's Gospel, Jesus says, "I have come that you may have life, and have it abundantly." God's intention for us is to be whole, complete, to know ourselves as beloved and to live a life of love. "The chance is not simply to persist, but thrive; to not simply exist, but flourish. To have a sense of meaning, purpose, and fulfillment; to know and be known, accept and be accepted." (David Lose) Jesus uses the image of the shepherd who calls out to his sheep to lead them to this life: "I am the good shepherd," Jesus says. But there are others, "thieves and robbers, who come only to steal and destroy." In Christ, God is saying to each of us, you are mine, but there are other voices that call to us; voices that steal that assurance and wholeness that God intends. And some of these voices come from within us.

One of those voices says to us, "Poor me. I am no good, inadequate, not worthy. I am defective as a human being." There are times when all of us fail, and we feel the sense of that failure in the form of guilt, perhaps, or feelings of not being good enough. Those feelings come into response to externals – from something we do. And eventually, we pick ourselves up, shake them off, learn from our failure and move on.

But for some people the "poor me" feeling comes, not from something they do, it comes from who they feel they are – defective, worthless. When we do listen to that voice that says "Poor me" then nothing else we do or don't do matters much, nothing will compensate for our feelings of inadequacy. It's not a matter of, I failed, but I am a failure. It becomes a matter of identity that robs us of our worth and self-esteem.

Moses is a case in point. We know the story. Moses was the son of Jewish slaves in Egypt whose mother saved him from ethnic cleansing by Pharaoh by putting him in a basket and setting him afloat on the Nile. He is rescued, by no less than the daughter of Pharaoh, adopted and made a member of the Royal household.

As a young man, in a moment of anger, he kills an Egyptian overseer and flees for his life. He becomes a man without a home, a family, unsure of even who he was. Moses ends up in Midian,

a tiny tribal community in the southern deserts on the east side of the Dead Sea. There he meets his bride and goes to work for his father-in-law. They very quickly have a son whom Moses names Gershom meaning “stranger” or “sojourner.” Such a name suggests that Moses is far from being at home with himself.

It’s there, while tending the flocks of his father-in-law, that Moses has his burning bush experience. God calls to him from out of the bush, giving him a job to do: “I want you to go back to Egypt and free my people.” You would think that a voice from a burning bush would do the trick that Moses would have hopped to it. But that’s not what happens. Moses responds to God by saying, “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh?” The unspoken implication: I’m nobody. No one is going to listen to me. Do you hear that “poor me” voice, that plea of inadequacy? Four times, God summons Moses and four times Moses tries to excuse himself. Finally, telling God that he is not eloquent enough, “I am slow of speech and tongue.” Though there is nothing in Moses’ story up to this point that would lead us to believe that was true. True or not, it was true for Moses. He was hiding out in Midian, trying to hide from himself as much as anyone else. “Who am I that I should go...? I am nobody. I am stupid, slow of speech; no one will listen to me.” You can hear the negative self-talk which leads to that core belief of being defective.

For most people, our sense of self-esteem, the feelings of being loved, accepted, worthwhile, begin in our childhood. Our early childhood experiences are etched in our memories and psyche. That is why it is so important for children to know that they are loved, to be praised, hugged, listened to.

Some people lack that experience. The voices they hear are those of criticism and blame. Nothing is ever good enough. They are ridiculed rather than reinforced. When that criticism comes from those authority figures in our lives, we internalize that voice; we own it as our own.

In the recent film, *The Help*, Aibileen is a courageous black woman in the 60’s who is a maid. She cleans, cooks, and raises the children of white women. The daughter of her employer, Mae Mobley, is not a pretty child. Mae’s mother pays little attention to her. She rarely picks her up, hugs her, praises her. But each morning when Aibileen gets to their house, she goes into Mae Mobley, gets her out of bed, hugs her, looks her in the eyes and says, repeat after me: You is kind. You is smart. You is important.

As events unfold, Aibileen is fired, before she leaves the house she goes to Mae, kneels down on the floor, looks her in the eyes and tells her: “You is kind. You is smart. You is important.” As Aibileen leaves, Mae bawls. The audience is left to wonder what will become of this little girl when the only loving voice in her life is gone.

“Who am I that I should go?” Moses said, “I am slow of speech.”

John Bradshaw calls this, a rupture of the self with self. It leads to an all pervasive sense that I am somehow flawed as a human being. I am defective as a human being. I am a mistake.

That lack of a sense of worth gets manifested in a whole complex of defense mechanisms in peoples’ lives. Some people respond by becoming over-achieving perfectionists – “No one could love me as I am. I need something outside to be whole and okay.” They strive to gain the approval of other people through accomplishments, piling up trophies. But it is never enough. “If people really knew me, they would know I am a phony” is how this gets heard.

Others become under-achievers. They are so overcome with anxiety and worry that they become paralyzed, afraid to attempt anything. They hide out like Moses. Stay low off the radar. Believing they are small, they live in small ways, too afraid to take risks and embrace life fully.

Still others attempt to fill this inner void with food or alcohol or material possessions. Again psychologist John Bradshaw writes, “This lack of self-worth is the core and fuel of all addictive behaviors. When people believe that they are unworthy, they tend to make choices that are unproductive, limiting, even destructive. They prove their lack of worth by their actions. It becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.”

“Who am I?” Moses said. “I am slow of speech. No one is going to listen to me.” But God has a response to Moses’ excuses; his attempt to evade what God was asking him to do. “Who has made your mouth?” God says to Moses. “Who makes a person dumb or deaf, seeing or blind? Is it not I? Now, therefore, go and I will be your mouth and teach you what you shall speak.”

Notice that God challenges Moses’ assumption, his assessment of himself: “I know you can speak, I made your mouth!” One way we overcome the poor me syndrome is to challenge those internal critical voices – our self-talk. Because it is our self-talk, that inner voice, that gives rise to our feelings.

Albert Ellis has called this the “ABC system. There are three points to every human reaction. There is an activating event. Here, that occurs when God calls Moses to go to Egypt. Second, there is the belief system through which that event is heard, evaluated and interpreted. Moses believed that he was not adequate, not eloquent. Thirdly, there is the consequent set of emotions: I am worthless. Who am I that you should send me? Action, belief, consequence.”

For example, a middle-age man has a secure job in a small firm. He consistently gets high marks for his work. He knows he is well regarded by his peers. One day his boss criticizes him for a small mistake – not submitting a report on time. His boss simply points it out to him without attacking him. Still the man feels utterly defeated. He knows that something is basically wrong with him. He believes that he has been exposed as a fraud. He is certain others will recognize that he should not be allowed to work there anymore. He is not perfect, so he must be worthless. He retreats to his office, closes the door and hides there for the rest of the day, knowing he will never be good enough.” (Nathan Walker – A Shame Free Church.)

This same thing can play out in our own lives. Someone criticizes us unfairly. That is the **A**ctivating event. We **B**elieve that we must have everyone’s approval or we are not worthwhile. That is the belief. As a **C**onsequence, we feel sad, depressed – Poor me! To break this cycle we have to add another point: **D**ispute the distorted belief system. “I don’t have to please everyone to be loved or to feel worthy. The problem isn’t me! It is the belief that is wrong, not me!” When we challenge a distorted assumption, the whole event is transformed. We get a different emotional reaction. We maintain our sense of worth and self-confidence.

We have to learn to talk back to those voices that tell us we are not worthwhile. The voice that says we are defective, inadequate. God doesn’t call Moses because he is perfect. Like all of us Moses is flawed, limited, imperfect. If we wait until we are perfect to attempt something, we will be waiting forever!

Another way we overcome the poor me syndrome is simply to acknowledge the fact that we are limited, imperfect...and so is everyone else. There was a movie out several years ago about a man in search of the perfect woman – a ten. In fact, that was the title of the movie. The truth is there is no perfect 10. No one is the total package! We just need to recognize that fact, get over it, and get on with it.

Someone has pointed out that Jacob was a cheater, Peter had a temper, David had an affair, Noah got drunk, Jonah ran from God, Saul condoned murder, Gideon was insecure, Miriam was a

gossip, Thomas was a doubter, Sara was impatient, Elijah was moody, Moses had a speech impediment, Zacchaeus was short, Abraham was old, yet God used each of them in great ways

Ann Lamot, who speaks and writes openly about her own spiritual and emotional journey, talks about the day when she first began to find her way out of self-pity. This was the day:

I poked a hole out of the cocoon and saw the sky of ingredients that would constitute my spiritual path.... I knew that no one comes holier than anyone else, that nowhere is better than anywhere else. I knew that the resurrection of the mind was possible.... I started praying, not the usual old prayer, "God, I am such a loser." But new ones "Hi" and "Thank you." I got that God was everywhere, poor old God, just waiting for you to notice, and enter your life like a track coach for slow people.

When God appeared to Moses in the burning bush, Moses was hiding out, laying low, not just from Pharaoh, but from himself. And God was like a track coach for slow people with Moses, he had to ask and reassure Moses four times. But Moses finally got it. God needed him, his people needed him. God saw the strength in him. God knew the truth about him. God believed in him, even when he didn't believe in himself.

"Who am I?" Moses whined. "I am limited, imperfect." True. Guilty as charged. So are we all. Yet God says: "You are the one who I will use to liberate my people." Who Am I? Beloved, accepted, needed, trusted, capable of doing more than we imagined through him who loves us...also true!

"I have come that you might have abundant life," Jesus said. "My sheep hear my voice and follow me."