

## “Outdo One Another in Showing Honor”

Romans 12:9-18  
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June 22, 2014

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The Bible is not all that big on competition or on being competitive. Its wisdom usually has more to do with team work and cooperating and pulling together. The Letter to the Romans is an exception to that rule. “Outdo one another in showing honor.” The word “outdo” conjures up a competitive environment; a race track, maybe, or a ball field or a tennis court. Outdo the other!

Now honor is a synonym for respect. So, in modern language, what the writer is really saying is: “Outdo one another in showing respect.” Having a strong competitive nature myself, I can’t wait to get to the Heifer Farm on Tuesday with our middle school youth, so I can see if it’s possible to outdo them in showing respect: respect for the farm and the animals, respect for each student, and respect for myself. As soon as I jump out of the red truck, I’ll be on the lookout for ways to demonstrate respect.

At least three awesome things happen when we show respect. First, the respect we show builds up the other person. It is so easy to tear other people down, point out their flaws, destroy their self-esteem. Disciples of Christ are interested only in building up the other, strengthening that person’s soul, multiplying that person’s self-worth. In this regard, respect is like a building block, it helps to form what I would call a beautiful human being. “Outdo one another in showing honor.” On the mission trips, this is an essential ingredient. Every student returning from a mission trip wants to be able to say to their parents and grandparents and siblings: I was respected.

If there is one thing I dread the most in my life, it is being the cause of someone having to say to me: ‘you disrespected me.’ Those are words I hope to not have to hear. When I do hear them, I am wicked sorry, and I bend over backwards to restore respect. Usually, when we compete, we look for a way to exploit the other person’s weakness. In our Christian theology, we do just the opposite; we look for ways to love the weakness such that it becomes a blessing.

The second thing that happens when we show respect for another human being is this: our own self-respect is magnified one hundred times. Self-respect is so elusive these days. It’s not available at Wal-Mart or through an on-line catalogue, or even at Stop and Shop. Self-respect is a product of respecting the people around us, especially the people who are different from us.

Many of the adults here will remember the stand-up comedian, Rodney Dangerfield. His often repeated mantra was “I get no respect. I get no respect.” I remember an urge to call him on the telephone and say, “Rodney, if you want to receive respect, you have to give it away.”

The Prophet Isaiah was no stand-up comic. He was a teenager, maybe sixteen when God got his attention. God was looking for a teenager to carry the message of respect into the world; as far as Delaware and Providence and Rutland and beyond. Isaiah thought it over for a few moments, then replied to God, “Here am I; send me.” Send me out into the world to embody your hope that respect will color all human relationships. And what we see in Scripture is that Isaiah grew in his respect for himself.

The third thing that happens when you respect the other is that you are actually honoring God. Since it is God who made that other person, when you show respect for that person, you are deepening your relationship with God!

Religion is short-changed when it is said to be just about behavior and ethics and doing the right thing. It certainly embraces all of that. But religion at its best is about deepening one's relationship with God. This morning, in the waters of Baptism, we celebrated the initiation of God's relationship with Ella Nicole Gibriano. In the waters of Baptism God doesn't say: Obey all my commandments. God says, "Let's have a relationship that is meaningful; that is life-giving; that is intimate; that leads to eternal life."

In a mysterious way, beyond any words I can find, our relationship with God deepens whenever we choose to outdo one another in showing respect for a neighbor. In the Bible, there are two occasions of note when people approached Jesus with the question, "What must I do to gain eternal life?" To one, Jesus tells the Parable of the Good Samaritan which is basically about respecting the one who is wounded or broken or suffering. To the other, Jesus suggests selling all his wealth and using the income to show respect for the poor. What Jesus knows well is that there is a direct correlation between our relationship with God and our respect for humanity. Thus, religion is really a blending of the two.

If you look up behind me at the cross on the wall, you can see how these two dimensions are symbolized. The horizontal bar of the cross stresses our reaching out to the world with open arms with genuine respect. The vertical bar of the cross stresses our relationship with the Divine. Where the horizontal and the vertical converge is the place of grace.

So I say to our youth in mission and to all of us who are disciples of Christ, “Outdo one another in showing honor.” This I say in the greatest of hope. Amen.