

New St. James Presbyterian Church, London, Ontario

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The Magic of Praise

Text: Some Pharisees in the crowd said; “Master, get your disciples to stop praising you.” But Jesus answered, I tell you, if these keep silent, the stones will cry out!” At the sight of the wonderful things that Jesus did the children shouted, ‘Hosanna in the Highest.’ And the Chief priests and scribes were indignant. “ Do you hear what the children are saying?” “Yes” said Jesus. And have you never read this: By the mouths of children, babes in arms, God has made **sure** of praise?”

It was harvest time on the farm. The men had been working out in the fields. Ravenous, they came in for dinner. But there was no delicious smell of cooking to greet them when they came in. There in the middle of the table was a pile of hay! The men asked the farmer’s wife whether she had gone crazy? She replied, “ How did I know that you’d notice? I’ve been cooking for you for the last twenty years, and in all that time I never heard a word that let me know that you weren’t just eating hay.”

Have you ever praised someone in front of someone else and the other person jokingly says, “Now, now, be careful, if you go on he will get a swelled head.” Has it been your experience as a child to be cut off from praise? Someone was telling me that their father said to them as a child, “ Why is it that everything you touch turns to crap?” What is the effect on a child of that kind of a vote of non-confidence? Perhaps you are a physician. You see someone deathly ill. You prescribe. They take the medication, get better, and never a word of appreciation? Are you an elder at New St. James and nobody ever thanks you for your visits? Are you a lawyer? You take on a very iffy case and then win it and suddenly there is a gripe about your fees? Are you a teacher who spends a lot of extra time with your students with never a word of thanks?

Appreciation and understanding can heal a damaged relationship. A couple came in for counselling. They were fighting over whether to have children, the man wanted a child, and the woman, as far as he was concerned, was expected to provide one. The woman was having none of this. They were ready to split up over the issue. Incredibly enough the husband had never asked his wife why she didn’t want a child. The husband simply said to her that her position was ‘unnatural’. If she did not have a child he would leave her for another woman.

After careful probing, it became evident that the wife did not believe that her husband would give her any consideration or appreciation when she had a child. She expected, from her daily experience, to be abandoned and left alone to raise the child. Her husband was not one to express appreciation. He was completely caught up in his work. So, she was conditioned to expect abandonment. She determined that she would not raise a child alone. She was living without appreciation now, and it felt like starving to death.

Once the husband saw where she as coming from, he understood. He said he would be there for her and be a true father to their child. But he went further. He said: “ I have discovered that I love you anyway. If you don’t want to have a child that is okay,” and he meant it. He said he would stick

by her anyway. Once he said this something magical occurred and suddenly his wife said: "I want to have a child now."

Let us examine some basics of praise and appreciation:

- 1) Appreciation is a form of support. We all need it. If the people we hold in high regard are short on praise, it can devastate us and we can die inside. I believe that everyone of us needs a champion, someone in our corner. For whom are you a champion? And who can you count on to champion you?
- 2) Praise is not flattery! Some people flatter others in order to get them to change their behaviour or to simply to try to extend control over them. This is a form of manipulation. We are soon aware that the person who lays on praise with a trowel wants something from us. People who are insecure are particularly vulnerable to flattery. In the hands of an astute manipulator they are like putty. If you are a controller count on it people will rarely tell you the truth. If you are super aggressive or defensive, count on it people won't tell you the truth. You are actually setting up yourself for flattery and you will be manipulated and suddenly, usually too late, you will become aware that you have been had, 'big time'.
- 3) True praise comes from the heart. It is non-manipulative and true praise always seems to change people for the better. One father told his son to charge what it was worth to cut the lawn. The boy listened and did a good job and charged five dollars. The father said: "That is an average job you have done. It is well worth five dollars. In my view a good job would be worth \$10.00. An excellent job would be worth \$20.00. If, however you did an absolutely superb job with cut and trim I would pay you \$30.00 I would not do that however if it was not worth it." The next two times the boy did a good job and charged his Dad \$10.00. His dad paid him gladly. Then one day the son got up early. He used two kinds of lawnmowers, edge cutters, a rake, a hoe and garbage bagged the clippings. He worked at the lawn until he was sure that it was perfect. He asked his dad to inspect and pay him what it was worth. His dad reached into his pocket and pulled out thirty dollars. His son's eyes grew as big as saucers. He whooped in glee and ran down the path on a mission to buy that new bike he had been saving up for. From then on, the son rarely turned in a top job, but he never did a \$5 dollar job again.

Have you ever noticed that people thrive on praise? Why is it so important to us to be appreciated? What is going on here?

In the gospel lesson today, we came across two striking examples where Christ's critics were horrified that Jesus was receiving praise. According to his critics Jesus was supposed to cut off praise as unbecoming. According to the scribes and pharisees there was to be no praise, no enthusiasm! It was not only inappropriate, it bordered on blasphemy.

I believe that one of the founding principles of the universe is Praise. It is one of the reasons why God created the universe.

For instance, Scripture says following the creation that " All the morning stars sang together for praise to the Creator. St. Francis in his great hymn 'All creatures of our God and King' picks up wind and fire, water, flowers, fruits, the earth, the sun and moon. All are seen to have voices and are to sing. When Jesus confronts his critics, he quotes from psalm 8, verse two. It is a rare bare faced claim to divinity by Jesus.

Listen carefully!

“Above the heavens is your majesty chanted by the mouths of children, babes in arms.”

This reference was not lost on the scribes and pharisees! And then Jesus adds these words: “By the mouths of children, babes in arms (i.e. That cannot be controlled) God has made SURE of praise.”.

“I tell you if these keep silent the stones will cry out!”

This is an even stronger claim to divinity. Meaning? Inanimate stones will recognize their Creator and call out praise. If the disciples didn't cry out, there is a fail safe: STONES!

Jesus is teaching here that God has made sure that there will be praise for His divine Messiah. That is why the Scribes and Pharisees lose it. Blasphemy they think.

For Jesus praise is necessary. It is built right into matter itself.

Study after study shows that animals and plants grow better when praised. In the same way you and I grow with praise. Let's note an important point here: Affirming people genuinely is many times more effective than negative criticism.

If you are in any form of leadership today, expect negative criticism. It comes with the territory! Politicians need to develop tough hides. The criticism is continual and endless.

Expect it too within the church. People do not drop their humanity at the church door. So, if you are in church leadership, expect negative criticism, particularly if you initiate any form of change.

One professional diver, who wrote a book on criticism said that she was endlessly criticized by her coach, but she knew the motive behind it was affirmation. Her coach wanted her to be the best diver she could be and so he was ruthless with his criticism. **But he also praised her as well.** When he praised her, she glowed, because she knew she had really improved!

Are you in trouble with your significant other today? Try the magic of genuine praise from the heart. In today's world duty no longer sustains relationship. Love alone sustains relationships.

At work, even if it kills you, and you much prefer to criticize, try the discipline of genuine non-manipulative praise. Find something that the person does right and praise them for it.

Here is another strategy that is a basic law of human relations. **Never commit anything negative to writing!**

Abraham Lincoln had to learn this one the hard way. He loved to criticize and lampoon people and he was very good at it. One day, a man whom he had lampooned, challenged Lincoln to a duel on an island in a river early one morning. Lincoln chose broad swords and went into training. The duel was stopped on the very day by the seconds of both sides. Lincoln never committed anything negative to paper again. Lesson learned!

If you are a Christian leader in a church, this simple principle of never committing anything negative to writing may save you endless grief. If you need to vent, write it down, put it in a drawer and wait two days. Then enjoy ripping it up. If you can at the time, substitute a positive response.

Why? I know that it can feel delicious to get all that anger out against the person who ripped into you. But remember, when you do this the universe is not with you!

Why?

Because whatever we sow we reap. What goes around comes around.

Now for the graduate level. If you are **seeking** praise then you have to be open to receiving either praise or blame and you need to accept both. That sometimes is very hard. Is there a better way?

Yes!

If you seek neither praise or blame but simply to try to do the right thing, you are doing the work of the Creator. You are doing it for the good of life. Then it doesn't matter. You are not working for others. If you are working for a higher expression you don't worry about praise. Don't worry about blame. Both will trap you. They will both grind you into the ground They will both teach you that they are the wrong Gods to worship.

To get beyond either praise or blame is a very high goal. It is where Jesus lived day in and out. That is what made him so strong!

The best way to get above praise or blame is to get on mission. When Jesus was criticized by his parents for staying behind in the Temple with the doctors of the law, without his parents knowing, Jesus said: "Don't you know that I must be about my Father's business?" He was on mission!

When it came to the cross and Peter criticized Jesus, Jesus rebuked him for trying to get him off mission.

So, what is the answer?

Work directly for the Creator! All of us **need to get on our life mission, which is the love of God and neighbor- and meeting in some way a human hurt or hope.**

When we are on mission an insurance policy kicks in. "By the mouths of children, babes in arms, God has made sure of praise." The rocks and the stones will cry out if the praise is not forthcoming.

When we are on mission, we don't need to seek praise, it comes anyway as a pure gift of love from God.

Have you experienced that lately?