

“An Invasion”

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The day after V-J Day, on August 15, 1945, there was a radio program, entitled “Command Performances.” Maybe you remember those. I’m 55 and I remember them, so if you are older than I am, I’m sure you probably do. This particular one featured the era’s most popular celebrities: you had Frank Sinatra, you had Marlene Dietrich, you had Cary Grant, and you had Bette Davis, and a number of others. They got on to celebrate that momentous ending of the war and what it meant. The Allies had just completed one of the noblest victories in the history of the world. And yet there was not one beating of the chest of arrogant pride in what they had accomplished, on that night of those grand performances. The whole thing was opened by Bing Crosby, and he said, “What can you say at a time like this? You can’t throw your skimmer into the air. That’s for run-of-the-mill holidays. I guess all that anybody can do is thank God that it’s over.”

Just a humble response to such an overwhelming victory. And, after another performer sang “Ave Maria,” Bing Crosby came back out, and he said, “Today, though, our deep-down feeling is one of humility.” And then Burgess Meredith (the Penguin [laughter], I can’t help myself when I say Burgess Meredith), read a passage from war correspondent Ernie Pyle that said, “We did not win it because destiny created us better than all other people. I hope that in victory we can be more grateful than proud.” Listen to the humility in that statement.

The show mirrored the reaction of the nation at large. The nation wasn’t in this moment of, “Oh, look at how much better we are than the Axis’ forces.” It was a humble, “I can’t believe that it is over, and I can’t believe what we as human beings did to each other, and what we had to go through.”

The streets of New York’s Garment District were filled with 5” of confetti at the end of the party and celebration. But, joy gave way to solemnity and self-doubt. The war had been such an epic event that it produced rivers of blood, and no one was unaffected by this huge outcry of death and loss. So, rather than boast, people around the world recognized the savagery of what had happened. The savagery of what human beings were capable of doing to each other. I mean, that we even dropped the atomic bomb and savagery became apocalyptic. That was why they weren’t beating their chests with arrogance but reflecting with humility.

The people on that broadcast had part of one of the most important recognitions; they recognized that it was in victory that they were to be humble, not slapping bumper stickers on their cars that scribed to their own awesomeness. Their collective impulse was to warn themselves against pride and self-glorification. They intuitively reflected that the natural tendency of human beings is excessive self-love. And they didn’t want to do that in this moment; they wanted to recognize their place in this larger world.

Now, in baptism, the son of God came down from Heaven. But instead of commanding celebrations, because Jesus - the son of God - came to be in the world amongst these human beings. He went to an itinerant prophet outside of Jerusalem in a back-water place from Nazareth which is where he was born. Rather than taking over John’s ministry that was successful, he asked John to baptize him. And, when John tried to refuse, Jesus demanded he do it - so he

[Jesus] could be humble like everyone else. It wasn't self-promotion, it wasn't self-aggrandizement; it was humble unity - and we are called to live that same kind of life.

Now, sadly, our present generation has often replaced humility with self-promotion. We have become very good at self-promotion. Virtues like humility and truth-telling have been replaced by that same self-promotion, and the virtues of humility and truth telling, in our present age, are actually viewed as signs of weakness - and somehow that needs to change.

So, I started reading a book by David Brooks just because of the title. And the title of the book he wrote is "The Road to Courage." I thought it was interesting, in part, because of who the author is. David Brooks I had seen on television. He had been on NPR. He was a New York Times writer and I read an article he did one time. He was also on "Meet the Press" - which I can never see, because it is on during church. [Laughter.] He is also a Yale professor, and he said, through the years of being a Yale professor, he watched his students change from the '70s to now - watched them become more in the self-promoting vein. And, he wanted to teach a course actually on character, so that they could begin to see why character matters and how to gain that sense of character. And David Brooks talked about humility and getting on to the road to character, and he said to his students, that it begins not with self-aggrandizement, but with humility.

Now, I tell people all of the time who have children, going to church won't make sure that your kids are good people, but it certainly helps. Often, I've got people, even friends, whose kids are now in middle school or high school and they are just a mess. Almost to a one, "We just couldn't quite find the right church," and, "The kids never kind of made it into Sunday School, or into Youth Group." And, I wonder if they wouldn't have been quite the mess they turned out to be, if they had had that opportunity to learn about Christ-like characters and try to learn it from more than just their parents.

We have been blessed by what Erin [Marth] has done here over the last two years, and with what the teachers and others have been doing for the last 75 or more years here. We have been blessed by what Lisa is doing, and others have done before her in youth ministry, and with all of the leaders that we have had and will continue to have in youth ministry, because they have helped teach children and adults how to make good choices, how to be caring responsible people who are not just concerned with themselves, but for other people. For other situations in this life, when they watch their news, they are not saying, "Thank God I'm not like that person." But, they are saying, "How can I help?" That creates character.

When we baptize, we are saying in essence we are also responsible to guide your child in learning what it means to develop character, a Christ-like character, that will be with them their entire lives. That doesn't mean they are going to be perfect. It doesn't mean they are not going to make mistakes, but they will know their mistakes and they will pull themselves back up, and they will try again, with character.

I really appreciated what Dr. Brooks said after that: "I'm not going to say that the World War 11 generation was perfect. They had many character flaws: racism, sexism, anti-Semitism and a whole lot of other ism's. That wasn't a perfect generation. No generation is perfect, but there is a lot we can learn from the World War 11 generation that we are not learning. And, one of the key things we can learn from the World War 11 generation is *humility*. There was, in this country, during that time and with that generation, a great deal of humility."

He said, “I will give you an example of why it is Christ-like. Not only did Jesus get baptized when he was already sinless, but also Jesus told his Disciples to not brag or even talk about the healings that took place.”

But, Dr. Brooks gave the example of 23 individuals in Dwight D. Eisenhower’s cabinet, while he was President of the United States. In the ‘50s, at that time, there was only one memoir written from those 23 cabinet members, and it was so discreet that it was downright boring. No one wanted to talk about Eisenhower in a disrespectful way, or the office of the Presidency. They did not want to talk about the government in an inappropriate way, and no one talked in a discouraging, or bad way, regarding the office. By the time Ronald Reagan came along there were 12 memoirs and they were not very discreet.

Now, can you imagine how many are going to come out here in the next year or two years or three years? We don’t respect each other like we once did. It’s about me rather than any sense of humility, according to Dr. Brooks. He talks about it, as if we are living not in a culture of humility like the World War II generation. We are living in a culture that he calls the “Big Me” generation. He said between 1948 and 1954, psychologists asked more than 10,000 adolescents whether they considered themselves to be very important people. And, between 1948 and 1954, only 12 percent of adolescents said, “Yes, I’m a very important person.” 12 percent. The same question was asked of people in 1989 (quite a long time ago unless you’re my age or older), 80 percent of boys and 77 percent of girls said they were very important in that 30 years. In 2018, it has to be well over 90 percent who say they are very important. It is good to have a sense of self-worth, but when it goes beyond self-worth to narcissism, it becomes a very uncomfortable and, I think, dangerous place to be.

The lack of humility, according to Dr. Brooks, has also created a tremendous desire for fame. Fame used to rank low in life’s ambitions for most people. A 1976 survey asked people to rank their life’s goals, and fame was 15th out of 16 options. Fame was that low. By 2007, 51 percent of young people reported fame as being their number 1 goal in life, and now it’s got to be even more, so that same survey in 2007 (and I wish I had a more recent one). But again, if you’re my age or older it wasn’t that long ago.

In 2007 they interviewed hundreds of middle school girls and those girls said they would rather have lunch with Jennifer Lopez than Jesus Christ. Now thankfully Paris Hilton was third [laughter] behind Jesus. At least Jesus beat Paris, but Paris Hilton beat out every United States President, Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. So, you have a way to go.

Popular culture reaffirms this “ME” centeredness: “You are special,” “Trust yourself,” “Be true to yourself.” We have self-help books that sell millions on those three phrases, and they are so detrimental. Movies like Pixar and Disney are constantly telling young children how special and important they are. And, that builds up self-esteem - but maybe too much - and it impacts everything. It becomes a gospel of self-trust.

It even affects Christianity.

Now if you have ever read the book “Eat, Pray, Love.” I didn’t. Apparently, Dr. Brooks did and I’m stealing it. But Elizabeth Gilbert, who wrote the book, made a statement of her

understanding of God and she said, “God manifests himself through” - and I’m quoting - “*my own voice from my own self. God dwells within you as you yourself, exactly as you are.*”

“My and you.” I didn’t hear “God” anywhere in that. It was “my” and “you.” *Self-trust, self-need, self-preservation, finding God in myself* - and that isn’t where you find it.

I love to quote Joel Osteen, because he is the biggest charlatan in the Christian Church today. Joel Osteen says in his book “Become a Better You,” “You were made to excel, and you were made to leave a mark on this generation. Start believing ‘I’ve been chosen, set apart and destined to live in victory.’”

No wonder people are turning away from the Church in droves, because the minute you don’t feel that your life is a daily victory, the moment you don’t think you’re excelling in your life - it can’t be my fault. It’s God’s fault! Joel Osteen told me that I would feel this way every day, and I’m not there. So, God must either be uncaring, unsupportive, or maybe doesn’t exist at all, because it can’t be me. And, all of a sudden, God doesn’t matter. So, we go looking everywhere else for where I can feel victorious every day, where I can excel in every way to be the person that I’m meant to be, because I’m not finding it with God; because all of this stuff happens to me, and it’s not fair, because I’m the center of my universe.

People do not have the character often to be humble enough to be part of something greater than themselves, because in this “Me First” generation its “I have to be the center.” But, that becomes a very lonely place when all of us are standing in our own little silo saying, “It’s about me.” And, this person is not looking at me saying it, because they are doing it themselves, and everybody else is doing it themselves, and no one is looking at each other or relating to each other or, God forbid, helping each other, because we are all in our little place going, “It’s me,” and nothing gets done - nothing gets accomplished.

Only when we are humble enough to look at another person, and to care, and to try, and to offer ourselves - and that takes humility. Because, if it is all about me, why would I help somebody that is not as good as I am? I would be wasting my time when I could get so much more done. They are not worth my time. Why would I waste it on them, when I can do so much more myself?

It’s only when we can become lowly and humble enough to see the other person is as good, or better, that we can give them value and lift them up. Jesus did that in baptism. He went and found the lowliest people - those who needed to be exercised of their demons, for goodness sake, and saw them as having as much value as him. He spent time with them because, for Jesus, it wasn’t about me, it was about everyone else.

I pray that each one of us will begin to really work on our own character so that we can be an example to younger people, and I think you find that in Church. I’m sorry, I’m preaching to the choir today, but if we set that example ourselves, and are humble, and loving, and caring for one another, and everyone else, then maybe we can start a new culture in our society that might just catch on and might affect the rest of our world. Maybe we can learn it again from that generation that wasn’t as concerned with fame as it was with the greater good. We pray that that will happen and begin today. Amen