

“WHAT DO YOU SAY WHEN YOU TALK TO YOURSELF?”

**Text: “They think in their hearts that God
has hidden his face and will not see
them nor hear them....”**

Psalm 10:11

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Charlotte, North Carolina
June 8, 2008**

Introduction

What do you say when you talk to yourself? I wish we had time to go around the Sanctuary and ask for your individual answers. But since that is not feasible, let me tell you what I hope to accomplish. I have three objectives.

One: to highlight the importance of what we say to ourselves, especially the messages sent to the inner soul and psyche, where they are stored forever in what Freud called “the unconscious.” From there they can pop up uninvited to interrupt our daily routines and disrupt the peace and harmony of our lives. Be positive when YOU speak to you. Sometimes, as St. Pogo used to say in Walt Kelly’s cartoons: “We have met the enemy and he is us!”

Two: to concentrate on the dangers involved in what you say to others. Be positive when you speak to you, but also be encouraging in what you say to others. You can make a lifetime of difference.

Third then, my final objective will be to take a quick peek at how Churches and communities also talk to themselves, and by what they say and hear, either help or hinder the future course of their discipleship. That’s a tall order, let’s be about it.

I.

First: when you talk to yourself, what do you say? Before you answer you first have to agree that you do in fact talk to yourself. I tend to call myself names when I do something stupid, like you dolt and dumbo or even fatso. I also work out problems with others by talking with myself. I have some marvelous speeches I give in the shower.

The whole idea of talking to yourself makes me a bit nervous. I grew up in a neighborhood where the locals talked out loud to themselves all the time. We had some strange ones, God bless them. They were the talk of the town. Old Bessie Hunter, e.g., (I have changed the name of course) used to shout acrimonious epithets at the imaginary aliens who were flying around her porch. Once in a while she even threw her flower pots at them. Snake Thomas, powered in part by demon rum, often ranted and raved as he tossed things out the kitchen door. One day he almost finished himself off and his house as well, when he ripped the gas stove loose from the wall and pinned himself behind it in the corner.

Oh dearie me, they almost made me lose the chance to marry my darling Peggy. She was visiting one evening early in our relationship, when the moon was bright and fully round. I was looking forward to sitting with her on the porch. But either Bessie or Snake got involved in their usual antics. Meanwhile, four doors up the street, slightly irregular Rosie Weingartner began to shriek a multitude of anger at her poor aging father who was sitting on his porch. He couldn’t hear too well, so it didn’t bother him too much, but it sure scared Pretty Peg. She went inside to talk to my mother. She grew up on the fancy side of town where such behavior would not be admitted. It took me a long while to settle her down; subsequently, it took a lot of nerve to attempt this sermon topic today. Wives have long memories, I have found.

All that aside, I want you to think about our topic at a different level. When you are alone at the end of the day and find a trysting place to be by yourself, what do you think about, and what do you say, to you?

I took our sermon title from a book I found on sale titled, What To Say When You Talk To Yourself? The title caught my eye, for I had been thinking of the subject. And since it was only a buck ninety-five, I figured I could take the chance. A good sermon title is worth at least that much. It was self explanatory. Be careful what you say to you, for you will end up believing it. It echoes of modern pop-psychology I know, but then the Bible also warns that as we think in our hearts, so we are. Belief precedes the action. You are what you think.

So, stay with me....what do you say to yourself? Good things or thoughts of guilt or fear or failure?

Bennie Helmstetter, the author of the book, advises that each of us should set aside a few moments each day, preferably in the morning, to talk out loud to ourselves: in the shower, on the porch, in the garden, in the car. (I suggest you might want to warn your spouse or room-mate, or your fellow workers.) But try to start out your day with some positive input into you. Talk to yourself. Of course, you should also talk to God in the morning. But you can do both in your morning prayers. Begin with something like, "I am a child of God. This is a grand new day. Tell me what I need to hear. I made it though another night. Thank you Lord Jesus."

Now that might sound idle and unnecessary to some of you. But I spoke with a dear friend of mine last week who is "older than dirt" – his words. He said he was fine – for his age – but he keeps wondering what it is going to be like to die. "I'm ready to go, he said, but what's going to happen to me?" I said (as if I knew), "Bob, it's like going to sleep at night, with pains and troubles and worries galore; but then you wake up the next morning feeling like million bucks. Like Willie Nelson used to sing one of my favorite old Gospel songs: "I'm gonna' kneel at the feet of Jesus in the morning!"

When Rene Descartes, the Seventeenth Century French philosopher, was trying to figure out whether he was here or not, he kept narrowing it on down to one basic truth, which he said was, "Cogito Ergo Sum: I think, therefore I am." What he meant was that the only way he could talk to himself was to realize that it was he who was doing the thinking and the talking. You can visualize a little man/woman inside your make-up who sets your pace and pattern. Think it first; then all the rest will follow. The goal is to take custody of you. Be in charge, of you. If you do not anchor yourself down, you will blow around in whatever wind comes swishing by.

Let me step aside here for a moment and speak to the graduating seniors and their families, whom we honor today. I do not know most of you very well. What I do know, I admire. You are blessed, and you are a blessing to your parents, your schools and to Sharon Church. Before I realized that this would be your day, I was already thinking about this sermon. The previous paragraph, encouraging you to take custody of you, was already written. Somebody will be in charge of your life, I had written, and it might as well be you. Become the Captain of your own soul.

The first step in making this all happen is for each of us to take control of our lives. The problem is, Sir Julian Huxley warned a long time ago, that there are two captains on the C-Deck already, in charge of your ship. Both claim equal authority. One, as St. Paul notes, speaks for your higher self; the other for the lower: one positive, one negative. Call them the id and the super-ego. Call them whatever you wish. But one voice inside will steer you right; the other will lead you astray. One will try to build you up; the other will try to tear you down. You need to lean on and listen to the right one.

Marcus Aurelius, the best of the Roman Emperors, wrote a precious little book called The Meditations. He wrote: "Who we are, and what we become, depends upon what we think about ourselves." We project it on our screens, and then we follow it. Others have said the same. All through the Twentieth Century, with psychology and psychiatry from Freud up to the most recent theorists, we know that trouble or feelings of inadequacy do not normally come from the outside. You hear that "Sticks and stones can break my bones, but names will never hurt me." Right? Wrong! It's a lie. It is precisely the names you are called and that you call yourself inside that will hurt you! In time, if left unchecked, they can destroy you.

In Shakespeare's Hamlet, (Act One, Scene 3), the wily Polonius is giving advice to his son as Laertes is going off on his own journey. The Father has tons of advice, as parents and preachers usually do. He tells his son to be

careful with his money (does that sound familiar?), and that he should be modest in his expenditures. The famous advice, which is often attributed to Ben Franklin, is original with Polonius: “Neither a lender nor borrower be.” He tells him to learn to listen: “Give everyone thy ear, but few thy voice.” Then as a summary Polonius concludes his advice with: “This above all, to thine own self be true, and it must follow as the night, the day, thou canst not then be false to any man.” It’s formal Elizabethan language, but it is a shortcut to the gist of this sermon. If you compromise yourself, you have nothing left worth keeping. Take custody of you.

We often surrender it to the wiles of the moment. Years ago Eric Berne wrote Games People Play. He said that each of us follows a script, as it were, written out and accepted by us while we are still very young. All the world is a stage, according to Berne. It is more complicated than that to be sure, but it strikes the bell of an important truth. I have found that people do not really change all that much. Once in a while something dramatic drives into the center and people change. But most of us finish the way we begin. You will most likely find that a trustworthy friend now will remain that way until your 50th Reunion. Those who cut corners at 65 were also cutting them at 30. Some change, I know, but the friends and family I trusted with my life at age 30 are the same ones I would trust it with today. The scripts we follow go both ways. Berne says that we learn the part and play it, over and over again. And, unless you manage to break the script, break character and change it all, it will continue to guide and move and manipulate you until all your days on earth are through.

It does not matter at this point what anybody, or everybody, else says: not your friends, not your teachers, not your doctor, not your counselor, not even your pastor, no one, no where. Until you say it to you, and you believe you, it is not and never will be a part of you. “As a man thinketh in his heart, so he is. And so she is.” First, be careful what you say to yourself!

II.

Then, secondly, be careful what you say to others. I had a wonderful brother who died at age 43. It was sad. He had a bad heart, but I think negativity helped to debilitate him. He worried all the time about what other people thought about him. One child psychologist guessed that in an ordinary home, by the time a child reaches 18, he/she has heard the word “No” at least 150,000 times. No this; don't do that; no, no, no, no, no! Bobby was a good person. He was as kind as anybody who ever lived. He was big and strong, even if he shared the family weakness of being large in width as well as height.

But Bobby was the baby in a strong-willed, proud and confident family. Somehow the negatives took root. When things went wrong, he would come home from high school disgusted, saying, “I can't do anything right.” I'd say, “Bobby, yes, you can!” They teased him about his weight and it bothered him. His loneliest moments were the times he felt he was unworthy. He told it to himself. He believed it. How he came to lack that confidence and self esteem, is as mysterious as what happened to Big Brown last evening in the Preakness. I sure never knew. But I have discovered a common denominator. Underlying most all of them is what we call a failure of self-esteem. When you fail to believe in you, the trouble begins. Bob Schuler and Norman Vincent Peale and many others would agree.

Your inner child of the past in your soul and psyche is listening all the time to the voices around it. So much of what goes on in the world can tear you down. Parents don't mean to, but they do it and they often learn too late. One exasperated father asked me decades ago: “Why didn't someone tell me that I was supposed to build the kid up; I thought I was supposed to use the belt to beat him into submission?”

When I was a young parent my father came over one day to visit. I was doing my best to impress him I guess. He was quiet as he usually was. But the next time we got together he said he wondered how any child could grow up with confidence with everybody telling them what was wrong.

I know fully grown adults who are still trying to please their parents. The voices of others, who have had a shaping influence on a growing young person, can cut them down forever. Peers can also be so cruel; children ridicule children who are different. Some of us build our own egos by tearing down others. We rise by stepping on others. Every one of us has seen the tears of a child who has been physically or verbally abused by playmates. We each and all need positive feedback to rise up above it all. The world can be unkind – so, be kind to yourself.

Husbands can be guilty. They can transfer their own failures and frustrations, and blame their wives every time things go wrong. One famous Christian evangelist told me one day that he could apologize to his wife with such care that she usually ended up believing that it was her fault. Men have trouble appreciating what a wife and mother mean to a home until her work is almost over. Happy is the husband who can appreciate the talents of his wife all along the way. It takes a long time for most of us to learn it. Nowadays parenthood is shared far more than when I was young, but I would guess that the message is the same. “Husbands, love your wives as Christ loved the Church.”

Wives can also hurt their husbands, out of their own needs and changes. It is not easy to be the wife of a husband who is going through a crisis of health or confidence or finances, or maybe just growing older. It is not easy to be the mother of a child who is leaving the nest to go out on her own. Gail Sheehy used to write that the proper passage into adulthood requires that roots be torn up out of the ground; but the problem is that the ground they are being torn out of is the parents’ heart.

You have the point by now, surely. Bosses and fellow students and co-workers can join in the parade of tearing you down, too, if you allow it. Some in authority choose to lord it over others. They belittle the ones who work beneath them. Maybe insecure themselves, they work their frustrations and inadequacies out on the employees in their care. They shouldn’t do it to you; that is for sure. But you can endure it if you refuse to let negatives get inside of you. There is a huge difference between being guilty, and being made to feel guilty.

This is a long way of saying that your inner citadel, the soul who you are, has a job to do. Try to visualize it that way . . . a little person at the core of your being – in your sub-conscious. His or her only job is to listen to what other people say to and about you and what you say to yourself. Thank God for those who say good things, who accentuate the positive. Their voices are heard. I have focused probably too much on the negatives. They are what I have heard most often in my counseling work through the years. But the opposite is true as well. When you think of the others in your life, have you been consciously trying to build them up, to treat them as children of God, favored in his sight?

When Jesus told us to love our enemies, he was aware that some folk were not made to mingle with each other. What he meant was that if you can cross the boundaries of race and religion and idiosyncrasies in your mind, and help affirm the others as children of the Heavenly Father, that will help to put you at ease; and more, to bring them inner confidence. That way everybody wins and the world will become a far friendlier kinder place.

My plea today is that we not only say good, positive things to ourselves, but that we say them to others. It's all interrelated, isn't it? Cast your bread upon the waters and you will find it after many days. Treat everyone you meet with respect. Give them positive input, no matter who it is and no matter what their position. I don't pretend to know where the future of the world is going. I have never claimed to be a prophet. But one thing I think I do know. It is that in the Time and Providence of God we will have to cross the old boundaries which have separated us for centuries. We will all have to learn to hold hands and march on together to find a common future. If not, it is rather easy to predict, there will not be much future at all for generations yet to come. And funny, how it all starts with what we say to ourselves.

There are countless examples in the Bible of what God's chosen servants said to themselves. God said to Adam and Eve: "You have the freedom of the Garden. But, don't take of the tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil." But, Eve got to talking to herself. She said the serpent talked to her, but everyone knows that serpents cannot speak Hebrew. Almost nobody can speak Hebrew, for that matter. It was her other side, inside, whispering to her.

The next day, she got Adam talking to himself too, and both of them took the fruit. God asked them why. Eve said, "The serpent made me do it." Adam said, "Eve told me to do it." The serpent, or Satan, or the little voice within comes to each and every one of us all the time. But unless and until Eve and Adam talked themselves into it, they never would have touched the tree. When they told themselves that it was alright, the trouble began. What do you say when you talk to yourself?

III.

Now, I told you I had a third objective. It will be brief, indeed. I said that churches also "talk to themselves." A church can ruminate about the things that can and have gone wrong. A congregation can hold on to the past and continue to try to do things as this or that minister did them back then.

A church with a long history like Sharon Presbyterian has had some good times, but some of the other times too. Church work I know is never easy, not if you choose to challenge the powers of evil in the world. If we curl up quietly in the Church Parlor and chat about how nice we have it, taking a little peak now and then at what the Bible might be saying - it might look easy, but it won't last long. It's meant to be a struggle. It is meant to be a battle. It is supposed to be a congregation talking positive things to itself and listening for the Voice of God.

As the Church talks to itself, the conversation must also be honest, positive, and forward looking. Bad mouthing others, those who disagree with you, those who want to experiment, and those who willing to take a risk, is self-defeating. In love we can correct and learn to honor the past but to let go of the burden of how things used to be. The first question is what God is saying to us. A Congregation, just as individuals, can talk itself down. When troubles come many crumble and give up.

So, I ask you: When Sharon Presbyterian Church talks to itself, what does it say? I hope it is not, "Why do things go wrong? Or "Why do we continue to go sideways?" It should sound more like: "Lord, take hold of us. Help us to do our job, to grow and prosper in your work. We can do it. We are ready Lord to follow where you lead. We are ready, period. Use us, make us, heal us, mold us into the people you need us to be."

What do you say when you talk to yourself? Last chance to summarize . . . the Psalmist said he wanted to be worthy. Simon Peter said he wanted to be forgiven. Adam and Eve wanted another chance at the Garden. Gideon said he wasn't strong enough to lead the nation. (God said, "Yes, you are.")

Life is an empty vessel. You have to fill it up with something. Why not fill it with the right thing? If not, the wiles of the world will rush right in. They will tear you down. Why not fill it up with Jesus Christ? If you feel hollow and worried inside, let His power and peace come in. Be careful what you say to yourself, because you will end up believing it, and being it, for now and evermore. Amen.