

Affirmation

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“For we do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves
as your slaves for Jesus' sake.” – 2 Corinthians 4:5

Our culture has peculiar ways of affirming people. The most public, probably, and perhaps the most influential for the lives of large numbers of us, is the democratic process. We vote for our leaders. We affirm a choice, and that choice is a person. We affirm people by voting for them. That's the public, grown-up way of affirmation.

Then there's the public, childhood rite of affirmation, which we call the playground. Who will we spend our precious moments of play time with? Will it be with the pretty girl or the popular boy? Will it be with the athletes playing catch or basketball or kickball, or will it be with the kids leaning against the fence, hands stuffed in pockets, already disengaged with their society swirling about them?

And which of us doesn't remember the affirmation ordeal of being picked – or not – to play on the team? Or the semi-affirmation of being picked but then spending most of the season on the bench or the sidelines?

For the truly gifted, the affirmation can be spectacular. I wonder what LeBron James thought of the 25,000 square foot banner bearing his cruciform image on the side of the Sherwin-Williams Building a few years back, with the advertising slogan, “We Are All Witnesses”? The religious imagery was unmistakable for anyone familiar with the Christian tradition, and referring to James as The King only reinforced his messianic image. He would be the one, finally, to save us from our low self-esteem and make us feel good about living in Cleveland again.

Winning the Superbowl, singing the national anthem before millions, or spelling the final word at the national spelling bee – they're all ways we are affirmed in our culture. We accomplish something – run faster or push harder, or sing more creatively or powerfully, or we dazzle with our memory – and people applaud, actually or symbolically. We look to others for our affirmation, basking when we receive it, crushed when we don't.

And it's quite natural that we do. I was in a video conference recently with half a dozen other directors of lay education programs in our church, and several of us applauded, with our microphones muted, when Kathy Clark announced that she's retiring at the end of this month. Kathy works in the national setting of our church downtown, and she has been a guiding force in promoting lay education in our churches. Our group of educators wanted to affirm Kathy's contribution to lay education, so we symbolically and silently applauded.

We all need affirmation if we're to develop emotionally, psychologically, spiritually, and even physically. We know that infants who are given adequate food and clothing and bathing, but who receive no physical expressions of affirmation – cuddling, for example – don't thrive. They survive, but they do not thrive, even physically.

Affirmation is the spark that ignites our will to live and not merely to exist. It provides an

unspoken, even unconscious incentive for us to engage with the world proactively. Affirmation tell us, often without words, that we can – that we can do it, that we can meet the challenge, that we can overcome the obstacle.

A good many years ago, I worked for two summers at a place called Camp Koch, a camp for handicapped children and adults run by the Easter Seal Society. My youngest sister had been a camper there since she was a little girl, and I went to work there during the summers between my freshman and sophomore years of college. It was hard work – physically and emotionally draining – and it was also some of the most important and rewarding work I've ever done. I learned during those summers what it means to discover that you have resources you didn't know you had. I didn't know, for example, that I could feed a person with cerebral palsy, whose head moved uncontrollably back and forth, while I also fed myself – without spearing either of us with the tines of a fork. I also learned what it meant to affirm the ability of a young person in a wheelchair, living with muscular dystrophy, who could barely lift a plastic bat but who wanted to play baseball. With some creative hardware and some creative batting stances, we got it to work. We got it to work for the children and we got it to work for ourselves. Affirmation was our way of life at Camp Koch.

And we never lose the need for affirmation. A friend of mine, who's an accomplished educator and dean of a major theological school, is married to a man named Dan. Whenever life blows up for her, and all the haunting insecurities from her childhood rush back to tell her that she's stupid, incompetent, or downright worthless, she says to herself, “At least Dan loves me.” Life may have dropped her into the middle of a hot mess, but the steady, quiet, lovingly patient affirmation of her husband, across the years of their marriage, helps her re-calibrate her sense of worth.

There's a reason one of the first songs we teach children in the church is “Jesus Loves Me.” Children cannot be told too often or too soon that they are loved by a love who doesn't live under their roof, the love of an unseen presence, a love greater even than Mommy's love or Daddy's love. They must be told that they are loved not because they've accomplished this or that but simply because they are who they are – they exist as a child of God. They are, in a very real way, the offspring of a divine love that surpasses their ability to know or even to feel.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu, in the book that we'll be studying as part of our midweek Lenten series, offers a blessing that says, “Dear Child of God, you are loved with a love that nothing can shake, a love that loved you long before you were created, a love that will be there long after everything has disappeared.” That's the kind of affirmation that doesn't depend on your ability to spell a word or kick a ball or earn more than the next person. That's the kind of love that Paul is talking about in our text for this morning.

When Paul wrote to the Corinthians that he proclaimed Jesus Christ as Lord, he was saying something not just about Jesus, but more importantly for our purposes, about himself. To proclaim Christ as Lord is to affirm our identity as a servant, to use Paul's language, of the eternal, uncreated love made flesh in the crucified and risen teacher and healer from Nazareth. That's who Jesus is, the Word of God made flesh, and you should put four hyphens in there – Word-of-God-made-flesh. It's all one thing, one reality – true God, true human, as the creeds say – and that reality gives us our identity. We are Christians. Like Paul, we are the proclaimers of the Christ, the one who has the power to save through self-sacrificial divinely given love. We make that proclamation not so much for Jesus' sake, but rather for ours, to affirm our identity, to affirm ourselves.

One of the many problems we have with the Bible – and we have many – is language. We don't understand terms the way the authors of the Bible understood them. When Paul speaks of

proclaiming Jesus, for example, many of us immediately think of some sort of person in fancy dress with a scroll standing in the middle of the town square saying, "Hear ye, hear ye!" and we unconsciously think of ourselves as being part of the nameless, faceless crowd standing around wondering what's coming next.

But proclamation in the Bible is about participation far more than delivery. The person who proclaimed Christ crucified, as Paul did, participated in the life of the one he proclaimed: "I have been crucified with Christ and it is no longer I who live but it is Christ who lives in me." That's Paul writing to the Galatians, and his proclamation of a message so shockingly radical as the crucified and risen Christ demanded that he know, experientially, what he was talking about. Paul proclaimed the new life in Christ because he lived that new life in himself. When it comes to the gospel, proclamation is identity.

The question in life is not who you are. It's not what you can do. It's not what you earn or what you look like. It's whose you are. It's who you belong to, body and soul, heart, mind, and strength. And how do we tell the world whose we are? You affirm your identity, for better and for worse, by proclaiming to the world who you love. We are known by what we love.

"You shall love Yahweh your God with all your heart and mind and strength, and you shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two hang all the law and the prophets." That's the answer Jesus gave when the clever young man asked him what the greatest commandment was. The greatest commandment is to love, and by loving, we affirm and are affirmed, and so receive our identities.

If you want to feel good about yourself – if you want to feel affirmed – don't give yourself a trophy or a certificate. Don't call mediocre performance prize-worthy or praise-worthy, whether you've turned in that performance or whether your child has. Don't make excuses for your own selfishness or laziness or cowardice or poor planning, and don't do it for anyone else.

Instead, remind yourself, as Archbishop Tutu says, that you are a dear child of God, and that you partake, therefore, of divinity. To be someone's child is to be a part of them, inescapably, forever. Through no decisions of your own, you have been given a priceless inheritance of divine love, that you can choose to squander or that you can choose to invest. That choice is yours, just as it is the choice of everyone else. And when you choose to invest that inheritance of divine love in serving God and God's creation, the returns you'll get on your investment are beyond reckoning.

Planting a tree, teaching a child to read, helping a family out of the struggles and humiliations of poverty – when you invest God's love in activities such as these, you'll never know what good you'll do. But you are affirming who they are, who you are, and, most important, whose you both are, and in that affirmation you will find rest and peace and strength.