

THE PLEASURE OF HIS COMPANY

- Zephaniah 3:14-18a Mark 1: 4-11

Eighteen years ago, a study concluded that children who carry heavy book bags around to classes at school will experience detrimental results. Of course, with many schools cutting out the use of lockers for security reasons, the average students become almost like turtles and carry all their belongings on their backs. I have felt the weight of my grandson's bags and backpacks. I think that such loads do their backs no good.

Likewise, I have counseled with persons who have had their emotional book bags loaded up since they were a child. Some people, as they grow, learn how to jettison their pack and walk with confidence; others have trouble doing that, continuing to wear and own the harsh words that parents, grandparents, teachers, or peers have heaped on them. How many of you have grown up with or remember growing up with a pack full of criticism? "You never get your work done!" says one person. "You're a clumsy clod!" says another. "You can't sing!" said another. "You won't amount to anything" said yet another. Such harsh words, perhaps said in times of frustration or jest, are meant to be so called "constructive criticism," and can stick with someone for years. Just this week I had a letter from a writer who told me it was "constructive criticism." Cutting comments can hobble a child, a youth, and even an adult. Through reading, counseling, or discussion, one can learn not to continue to carry the baggage of one's childhood. But sometimes more baggage appears. Dealing with it is not easy.

If we look at the things that Jesus did in his ministry, we find largely uplifting, comforting, encouraging words shared with downtrodden people. Certainly he could focus criticism at sinful corrupt people or injustice. But for those who were

hurt by weakness or injustice, Jesus had sympathy. In fact, by coming to earth to dwell as a human being, we might radically say that Jesus could even empathize with those who were ostracized. God coming to earth in the person of Jesus let God “walk a mile in our shoes,” as the saying goes.

One of the sayings I once saw written on a poster said: “Criticize your children, and they will learn how to be critical people.” Friends, some adults around us today *are critical people and hardly recognize it because they grew up around critical people*. So, what do we do to counteract some of the harsh, heavy, and hard-hearted words of people in our lives? Can we break the cycle by starting to do what God did in the voice from heaven? As Jesus was coming out of the waters of his baptism, the voice from Heaven said: “You ... *you* are my beloved son. I am well pleased with you.” Those are the glowing words from God. And Jesus found the strength to share glowing words in his ministry because he was the recipient of glowing words at the beginning of his ministry. The Son was blessed to have the favor of his Father’s company. I know that the times I have received glowing commendations from others have brought joy and enthusiasm to my life and my work. The prophet Zephaniah said “God will rejoice over you with gladness; He will renew you in his love; he will exult over you with loud singing as on a day of festival!” [3:17-18] Israel heard encouraging words from the Lord God! Jesus too, heard these words from heaven: “You are my son; I love you. I am well pleased with you.” I’ve met grown men who confessed to me that they ached to hear words like that from their father, but they never heard them. It created a missing piece in their soul. Can you remember any time when someone—a grandparent, a minister, a teacher, a parent, a friend—said something kind and encouraging like that to you? Think hard if you can’t think of one at first. Such memories can lighten the load of criticisms. I’ll try to not let cutting comments program my life’s message;

you try too! Try to not let someone's hurtful words that you are good for nothing, or lazy or slow fill your pack. That doesn't mean that some parents or teacher's comments aren't well founded when they are disappointed in you! Good supervision takes good correction. But look for plenty of opportunities for praise! Praise will carry your coworkers, your children, your spouse, and your friends on a cloud of air. Last week I saw this quote that I loved: "Christmas in Heaven, what do they do? They come down to earth to spend it with you. So save them a seat, just one empty chair, you may not see them, but they will be there." I believe there are encouragers around us now, but there are also ones who have gone before us! What an image to think that they are joining us at Christmas time!

Today as we make new year's resolutions, work on sharing words of praise, and actions of compassion, and forgiving those who have caused hurt. Exchange those for the backpack that Jesus has filled. he said: "Take my burden upon yourself and learn from me. For I am gentle, and humble of heart, and you will find rest for your soul." "You are my beloved child," God said. "With you I am well pleased." May you yourself hear glowing words from Jesus and experience the pleasure of His company.

Let us pray: Caring God, speak with us gently as we enter this new year; fill us with your love, and through Jesus, forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us. Give us a new start in this new year, we pray. Amen.

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