

“Pride”

A sermon by Dan Lillie

Delivered at First Unitarian Church of Albuquerque on May 28, 2017

Pride, but not PrideFest

With June approaching, I’m aware that many of you might think I’ll be talking about Pride in relation to the upcoming Albuquerque PrideFest. Well, I’ll give it a free plug: it’s taking place June ninth and tenth, with a parade on Saturday going up Central Avenue, ending at the fair grounds where the celebration will continue.

But that is not the direction I’m headed today. While the kind of pride celebrated at PrideFest, pride in our identities, is certainly a good thing, it is just a small part of the kind, or kinds, of pride I want to explore today.

Two Goals: Encourage Humble and Grateful Pride, Discourage Arrogant Pride

I suppose I’d like this sermon to do two things around the concept of pride—the first is *encourage* pride in ourselves, our achievements, and our gifts, talents, and contributions to our community and our world. The second is to *discourage* us from becoming too proud that it impedes our ability to grow, to build relationships, and to do good in the world.

The key to doing both of these things is to be able to distinguish an arrogant pride from a humble and grateful pride. To sum it up, an arrogant pride is concerned with doing well; a humble and grateful pride is concerned with doing good.

That is the short answer, but Christine won’t let me end my sermon here, so I’ll go ahead and talk more about each type of pride, and the difference between the two.

The Positive Side of Pride

In a sermon last fall, I talked about the virtues of humility, and today's sermon about Pride is certainly related. I hope that today's message goes a step beyond "You should be humble, not proud." Rather, today's message is, "we should be humble in our pride."

Proud of Self

Pride is fine... sometimes. For example, I am unapologetically proud that I'm about to graduate from seminary. When I began college right out of high school, I never imagined I would someday have a master's degree. And yet, I'm 11 days away from completing this very big step in the journey towards becoming a Unitarian Universalist minister. Of course, I'm proud of this.

Proud of Others

And we can be proud of others as well. When my wife Emily was accepted into Regis University's accelerated nursing program, I was so proud of her. And when she completed it just a year later and graduated with her Bachelor of Science in Nursing, then passed her state licensing exam, and then got her first nursing job all in the course of a couple of months, I was incredibly proud of all that she had done. Did I mention we also got married that same summer? She took it all in stride, stayed calm through it all, and kept me calm through it all. Lots of reasons to be proud, and I hope that she is as proud of herself as I am of her.

This kind of pride is a good, healthy, life-affirming pride. It recognizes the best in ourselves and others, and we feel affirmed as human beings. But pride can be a slippery slope; taken too far, healthy pride can easily become arrogant pride. How and why does this happen, and how do we know when we've crossed that line?

The Negative Side of Pride

In seminary, I took a preaching class called Preacher as Self: Cultivating an Authentic Voice. The class was based on the Enneagram, a personality test kind of like the Meyers-Briggs, but with less of a purely psychological focus, and allowing more recognition of spirituality.

The Type Six

In the class, my first assignment was to take the test and determine my personality type. Turns out, I'm a Six: The Loyalist; and the most useful thing I learned about this personality type, is that we Sixes are motivated by fear. I didn't want this to be true, but upon reflection, I realized that it is. I came to recognize that much of what I do, and how I do it, is motivated by avoiding the things I fear; by planning carefully to avoid the things I never want to face, or to reduce that likelihood that they will happen to me. Sometimes this cautious approach has served me well. As much as my size and gender means I'm not often the first target of harassers, bullies, and muggers, I still tend to walk through the world with a constant vigilance; I get my car keys in hand before I step out into the parking lot; when possible, I give a wide berth when passing strangers on the street; I drive with my car doors locked; and park under the lightpoles in parking lots at night.

These are just some of the things I do to assuage my physical fears. On a deeper level, I have existential fears that I have to buffer myself against. Ultimately, I and my fellow Type Sixes have a very existential fear that we don't matter; that our lives will be lived and no will notice; that it won't make one bit of difference that we existed. I sleep pretty soundly most of the time, but when I lose sleep, this is what it is over: I want it to matter that I lived, and that the world is different, and better, because I existed in it.

The Slippery Slope

This is how and why pride can go from healthy and life-affirming to egotistical and arrogant. When we operate from a place of fear, we do things to prevent that fear from becoming real. And when that fear is that

we won't be accepted or affirmed by others, then we put forward a more confident and more competent version of ourselves than we really are; we try to hide our true, imperfect selves behind a façade of polished perfection. Surely, no one can deny my worth if I dress the right way, drive the right car, say the right thing at just the right time, and always, always, *always* do the right thing in any given situation. If I never make a mistake, my life can have value, right?

And so, for fear of not mattering, I can make it my mission to convince you that I do matter: and the best way to convince you that it's true is to first convince myself that it is true; so I create the narrative that I am awesome, amazing and perfect; that if I want something done right, I'm truly the only person that can do it; and how nice of you to try to offer me advice, but I already know everything that's worth knowing; and, I'm happy to share my amazing perspective and offer my unsolicited opinion by jumping into the private conversation you're having with someone else and solving your problem.

You're welcome.

But Actually...

The funny thing is, nobody likes it when I'm "that guy." Don't we all prefer the confident, but humble, person whose presence we just feel better in, because they aren't so self-absorbed that they can actually take an interest in us? And isn't it easier to take an interest in them in return, and to affirm their worth, when they aren't trying to one-up every story you tell and convince you how much worthier they are as a human? This is the down side to pride, when it goes too far towards arrogance.

The Antidote

So what is the antidote to arrogant pride?

How about a humble pride; not one based in ourselves and what we can do *all by ourselves*, but one based in gratitude, and how well we can contribute to and build the beloved community.

How about instead of a pride that say “I can do it myself,” we live into one that says, “I can do it with the support of my community.”

In the quote we heard earlier from President Obama’s campaign speech, he reminds us that we are better together; that try as we might to trick ourselves and others into believing that each of us is a wonderwoman or superman that can get it all done on our own (a dangerous and unhealthy symptom of the meritocracy we live in); despite all of our greatest individual efforts, I am humbly reminded that nothing great has ever been accomplished by a person acting completely alone; at least, I can’t think of an example.

Everything Worth Doing...

Sure, we’ve all seen isolated instances of amazing feats. But these are better suited to shows like “America’s Got Talent” or, if you’re old-school, Letterman’s “Stupid Human Tricks.”

Even the incredible scientific and technological discoveries that can be attributed to individuals came on the shoulders of the giants who came before them, whose research and revelations were the baton that got passed along that these incredible individuals were able to take and run with.

Every example of anything worth doing, every effort to improve the human condition, or build a better world, came from the unified efforts of passionate people willing to build relationships and work together, with intentionality, to change a rule, a custom, an attitude; and eventually this changes a culture; eventually this changes a society.

And it all starts with relationships; it all starts with community.

So, bearing in mind that we are better together, the best and healthiest pride we can have is in our accomplishments that serve the beloved community, and in what we as a beloved community accomplish together.

For example, Christine can be proud of the healthy, vibrant congregation that she did so much to help create, and that I am so fortunate to have been an intern for this year. But she didn’t do it alone. It took the commitment of each and every one of you to get us where we are today.

Another example: just three weeks ago, you all came together in beloved community, and called Angela as the senior minister who will lead this amazing congregation forward into the future. Angela is a fantastic minister, but you all deserve some credit for recognizing and appreciating her gifts, and coming together to call her to her new role. It was due to everyone who participated in the transition process; everyone who filled out the survey; everyone who took part in feedback meetings; everyone who came to the congregational meeting and voted; it is thanks to all of you that we are headed for a bright and promising future.

Thank You for Building the Beloved Community

Take pride in what you have to offer. It is important to recognize our gifts, and it is ok to take pride in our abilities. But what really matters is that when we use our skills, we do so mindful of the answer to this question: Am I doing this to make myself look better, or am I doing it to make the world better? We all have unique talents to offer our community, and we should be recognized and appreciated for what we contribute, just as we should recognize and appreciate others for what they bring. It takes all of us. We each have a role to play here.

I'd like you to take a moment, and turn to the person sitting next to you, or someone close-by. Decide who will go first, but don't worry, you'll both get a turn. Now, one of you say to the other, "Thank you for building the beloved community."

Now it's the other person's turn to say, "Thank you for building the beloved community."

Very nice! How did that feel? Let's do it again, now that you know what we're doing!

Face your neighbor, and person number one, repeat after me: "Thank you for building the beloved community."

Wonderful! Ok, person number two, repeat after me: "Thank you for building the beloved community."

Thank you *all* for building the beloved community: I am so proud of you.