

Sermon – Sunday, August 28, 2022

Rev. Randi

If you've ever had an injury, you're familiar with swelling. A dog bit me once on the joint of one of my fingers. The bite barely broke the skin, so I went to work. But the finger began to swell and swell. Finally, I went to an urgent care facility that referred me to a doctor specializing in treating hands. By then, most of the hand was swelling, too. It was getting bigger and bigger – so much so that the doctor's assistant had to cut my wedding band and engagement ring off my finger to prevent circulation loss. Indeed, the swelling was so bad that I required emergency surgery to drain it. So, the swelling had caused all sorts of issues for me. It had disrupted my day of work. It had caused me to temporarily lose a key symbol of my identity – my wedding ring. And it required an intervention to make it stop.

People who rush to be in places of honor at the dinner table or prioritize being first in line have swelled heads. People who prioritize getting ahead in life also have swelled heads. They think they are much more intelligent and well-liked than they really are. And worse, they tend to only associate with those who can help them feel intelligent or achieve their goals of being first. They don't have any time for or interest in people who can't do something for them. They think themselves too important to associate “with those people.”

Sometimes we temporarily suffer from a swelled head. It isn't our usual way of being. But we've had a good run of success lately, and we feel just a little too good about ourselves. We are winners, and we want to associate with winners. We forget about those who are less fortunate than we are. We're on a roll and want to stay on a roll. So, we go charging off to make friends with all the high-ranking people we think can help us stay on a roll. Never mind our lifelong friends. Never mind our baptismal promise of respecting the dignity of every person.

Sometimes we suffer from swollen head syndrome because we cannot let go of previous hurts. We keep nursing that hurt, and we think only about ourselves and that hurt. We become all important. We associate only with people who can help us justify ourselves and our pain. We move further from others, despite knowing we are to love everyone.

Sally Brown, a professor of preaching at Princeton, writes: “A widespread Western cultural story insists that we *are* what we *possess*. It is a false story—as is another that says the wealthy can enrich themselves endlessly at the expense of the poor without consequence. Shaped by such stories, our lives no longer bear the distinguishing Christian markers of profound trust in God and generosity toward neighbor and stranger in Christ's name.”¹

Swollen head syndrome causes issues for those of us who are disciples of Jesus. It disrupts our work of sharing God's love with every person. We can't truly love as Jesus did if we overinflate our sense of self-importance. We can't love as Jesus did if we only associate with people we think can help us.

When we suffer from a swollen head, others have trouble identifying us as Christians. Although Jesus always knows us as His, despite the sin, others in the world only recognize us by how we love others. When we suffer from a swollen head, we temporarily lose our identity as Christians in the minds of the world.

We sometimes need a little intervention to bring ourselves back down to size and return to being productive disciples of Jesus. We may need someone – another human being or the Holy Spirit – to tell us that we’re making ourselves too important. Then we are called to ask God to help us adjust our opinions of ourselves. We want to love ourselves, of course. But we don’t want to think of ourselves as better than others or make ourselves the center of the universe. We want to realize that we and every other human being are created in the image of God. Then, we reach out to help everyone in need, regardless of whether they make us feel important or can help us become more important.

God loves all people and has created all people in His image. Jesus put our needs before His own, despite Jesus being God – the most powerful Being in the universe. Jesus calls us as His disciples to recognize and love all people and to meet their needs. We’re called to prevent our heads from swelling with our sense of importance or our feelings that the world revolves around us. As disciples, we are called to be humble and to serve others.

ⁱ S.A. Brown (2010). [Homiletical Perspective](#). In D. L. Bartlett & B. B. Taylor (Eds.), *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary: Year C* (Vol. 4, p. 5). Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press.