

Ambushed by Our Egos

2 Kings 5:1-14 (summarized)

September 21, 2008

It is quite astounding how much guff we take from our own egos, isn't it? Naaman was a case in point. He knew he needed help. He wanted help. He was willing to pay well for it. But still he came very close to not getting help because his own ego couldn't bear the undignified way in which it was going to have to happen. To bathe in that scummy creek that the Jews called the Jordan River was too much a breach of his dignity to consider seriously.

We've all seen people get caught up in similar binds, haven't we? It can be a willingness, not at all unlike that of Naaman, to go without what the person desperately needs rather than bend enough to obtain it in a way that he considers to be "unlike him." Frequently we get a glimpse of it when, rather than have to admit the need for counseling, a person will choose to remain permanently stuck in whatever is her trouble or problem. It can also happen when, because he cannot bear to give up an illusion of personal omnipotence or of flawless, independent strength or of complete self-sufficiency we'll see a person keep his life distant, devoid of emotional intimacy, and lonely. So, yes, as important as our egos are, they are quite capable of making us behave ludicrously, quite against our own best interests.

Judith Viorst touches on a symptom of it in a poem that, as a male and a husband it pains me to share with you, but I will. "Even if I had a Ph.D in psychology, Even if I were a diplomatic whiz, Even if I were Queen of the Charmers and more irresistibly sexual Than whoever the current reigning sexpot is, And even if I had Mafia connections, I still would be incapable of persuading my husband, when lost, To stop – please stop – the car and ask for directions, Even if I were collapsing from thirst and from hunger, Even if I were reduced to darkest gloom, Even if I observed, between sobs, that we should have arrived three hours ago And the inn was going to give away our room, And even if I revived all my marital grievances: Old hurts and humiliations and rejections, I still would be incapable of persuading my husband, when lost, To stop – just stop – the car and ask for directions.

Even if I were to throw a full-scale temper tantrum. Even if I were to call him an uncouth name, Even if I were to not-so-gently note that, should we wind up getting divorced, He would have nobody else but himself to blame, And even if I, in a tone I concede is called screaming, Enumerate his countless imperfections, I still would be incapable of persuading my husband – when lost, To stop – just stop – the car and ask for directions."

I am quite aware that all UCC men have long since outgrown any such quirk, but apparently there are a few husbands (quite likely in other denominations) for whom there is, in the minds of their wives, still some tiny scintilla of truth in that poem.

The same theme was also echoed in the recent little riddle which asked, “Why does it take millions of sperm to fertilize one egg?” The answer, “Because none of them will stop to ask for directions.”

Even if it's true that men are more vulnerable to ego-based contortions than are women, by no means is it restricted to males. No, and the painful fact seems to be that the more competent, the more successful, the more resourceful, the more experienced a person is, the more likely he or she may be to have developed an ego that will make excessive demands, that sets up stupid boundaries and standards in one's life, and that creates delusions of total competency that are unsupported by fact.

That's why even the most brilliant married couple will sometimes allow their marriage problem to deepen and broaden until eventually the last vestiges of love and even of respect have been run right into the ground. One might think otherwise, but it isn't safe to assume that intelligence will head it off. No, as often as not the stupid-but-compelling voice of an over-developed ego has kept telling one or both of them, “We are (or I am) intelligent enough to handle any and all problems we have in a reasonable and discreet fashion. People like us shouldn't have to go to others with our problems.”

Similarly, the family of an alcoholic, not infrequently, will build a protective wall around him behind which his drinking is permitted to go on and get worse and worse. They'd never say it this way, but the compelling ego-lie is to the effect that all things considered it's better to risk losing him to his alcoholism than to undertake any kind of intervention that might allow this to get out and reflect badly or strangely on the family. “Our family has too good a name to put a cloud over it by publicly exposing this unfortunate bit of unpleasantness.”

Quite a different form of the same phenomenon has been known to draw intelligent, professional people in way over their heads. It happens when one's ego has made him blind to the fact that for all that he really does know and can do, there are nevertheless limits to his knowledge and expertise. Since he's a good teacher he can't believe that he isn't also a perfect parent. So for the lack of needed humility his parenting is terrible. She's a terrific physician so wouldn't that automatically make her a qualified counselor? No, not necessarily. He's a good counselor who comes to think of himself as the ultimate and quintessential husband, etc., etc. It can suck a person into dangerous bluffing, arrogance, destructive tinkering and other assorted bull-in-a-china-shop disasters.

This has to do, then, with a kind of self-defeating thinking of which, while we recognize it in others, we all remain at least somewhat vulnerable. At all costs “not losing face” is one example as is always “keeping up appearances,” “maintaining decorum” no matter what; above

all “preserving our image” and in all circumstances “seeming self-sufficient.” Driven by that kind of false and neurotic values, Naaman (before his friends managed to talk some sense to him) says “No!” No way will I take seven baths in that murky Jordan River. I’d rather have leprosy.” And his descendants say, “No, I don’t care how lost we are, I’m not stopping to ask for directions from some local yokel. I’m the kind of competent person who, with a little more time, can figure this out,” or “I’d rather see this whole thing go to smash than to ask HER for help. I DO have my pride,” or “If I can’t handle this problem on my own I’ll just live with it.” As absurd as all of that sounds when we’re the ones struggling with it, very good people get caught up in it.

In Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount you’ll recall he commanded, “Ask and you will receive. Search and you will find., Knock and it will be opened to you.” That is usually seen as having to do with the matter of praying, but in a vital way that instruction applies to what we’re talking about here too because it describes a basic premise and requirement of yours and my living. God has placed us here in such a way that we must continually be doing just that; be searching, be asking, be knocking. That’s because none of us has all (or even most) of the answers about much of anything. We are still in process, giving and receiving, as long as we live. We are created by God as interdependent creatures who continually need the help, the nurture, the wisdom, the feedback and the affection of each other. Attempts to outgrow those needs or to act as if we’ve outgrown them aren’t noble. So when we’ve reached a point where we have quit asking, seeking, knocking, that isn’t an achievement. It’s a problem.

A memorable and graphic description of one person discovering an aspect of this the hard way was embodied in a letter to a health insurance office. It said: “I am writing in response to your request for additional information concerning question #11 on the insurance form, which asks for “cause of injuries.” I had written “trying to do it alone.” You said that wasn’t adequate so I trust that the following will suffice. I am a bricklayer by trade. On the date of the injuries I was laying brick around the top of a four-story building when I realized that I had approximately 500 pounds of brick left over. Rather than carry them down by hand I decided to put them into a barrel and lower them by a rope and pulley which was part of a small hoist on top of the building. I secured the end of the rope at ground level and returned to the top of the building to load the bricks into the barrel. I swung the arm of the hoist and the barrel over the edge and went down to untie the rope, holding it securely to slow the descent of the barrel.

As line #6 indicates, I weigh 145 pounds. Because of my shock at being lifted off the ground so swiftly, I lost my presence of mind and didn’t let go of the rope as would have been best. Between the second and third floors, I met the barrel coming down. This accounts for the wounds and bruises on my upper body. Regaining my presence of mind, I held tightly to the

rope as I proceeded rapidly up the side of the building, not stopping until my right hand was jammed in the pulley. This was the cause of the broken thumb. Keeping my wits about me, despite the pain I still held on. At that moment, however, the barrel of bricks had hit the ground and the bottom tore out of the barrel. Without the bricks the barrel now weighed no more than fifty pounds. (I again refer you to my weight on line #6.)

Needless to say I began a rapid descent. In the vicinity of the third floor I met the barrel coming up. This was the source of the injuries to my feet and lower body. Slowed only slightly I continued my descent, landing on the pile of bricks. This, then, resulted in my sprained back and the internal injuries. Unfortunately at this point I once again lost my presence of mind and let go of the rope and, as you have guessed, the empty barrel crashed down upon me. That was when I sustained the head lacerations. I hope this answers your questions. Please know that in the future I will not hesitate to ask for help – will not again try to do things alone.

It can be that painful, difficult and humiliating a lesson to learn when, as too often happens, we force life to teach it to us the hard way. It comes down to this. We do need our egos. They're an important and necessary part of our self-worth, our self esteem. Unfortunately, though, our egos have no conscience and recognize no boundaries. That's why, if they're allowed to control us rather than our controlling them, our lives and efforts become distorted.

It's worth remembering old Naaman, then, coming awesomely close to deciding to keep his leprosy rather than go against the incredulous objections of his ego. The truth is that any "loss of face" that happens because of yours and my trying to cover up our humanness, our needs, our limits, isn't a life worth saving. Remember, too, that the image we sometimes work so hard to maintain, of being independent or of being unflappable or of being free of all insecurities and doubts, has no real audience. It doesn't really work for anyone except ourselves and a handful of others who are exceptionally shallow or dull.

And as to those ego-intoxicating heroics that can be so tempting, know also that even if we do manage to single-handedly pull off some admirable accomplishment, most of the time it will have happened at the expense of closeness to others. That makes it too expensive spiritually to have been worth doing.

From a Christian standpoint, remember above all that we are not here to turn ourselves into demi-gods, into superhuman beings, or into creatures who have overcome the conditions and limitations of being human. NO! Something like we saw in Jesus, we are here to live our humanity so fully, so authentically, so humanely, so engaged with all the lives and life around us that in that Christlike, down-to-earth fashion, and in very human terms, we too become God's word made flesh in our circumstance and time.