

We Are Worthy
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13:50

This week, high above Roswell, New Mexico 43 year old Austrian daredevil and former paratrooper Felix Baumgartner became the first person to break the sound barrier under his own power. He ascended 128,100 feet in a capsule attached to a helium balloon; he fell to the earth for more than four minutes and reached a speed of 833.9 miles per hour. Baumgartner had trained for five years to make this jump and had prepared for every possible scenario to make his jump a success. When interviewed afterwards, he said, "It was harder than I expected . . . Trust me, when you stand up there on top of the world, you become so humble. It's not about breaking records any more. It's not about getting scientific data. It's all about coming home." [1]

As we explore the Deadly Sin of Pride this week, Felix Baumgartner has been at the forefront of my mind. It takes a certain level of pride to be a daredevil in the first place, to have the nerve and the courage to set your sights on breaking a seemingly unbreakable record, knowing that you could be killed in the process, and that's not an exaggeration. Falling to earth from 24 miles high, reaching speeds of 834 miles an hour with nothing but an experimental new spacesuit to protect you—well, don't you have to have a certain level of courage, maybe insanity, but definitely self-confidence and pride to do something like that? And is this necessarily a bad thing? This is what I want to talk about today.

Robin Meyers, the UCC Pastor whose book I have been using as the inspiration for this sermon series, asks us to consider the difference between good pride and bad pride when we explore this Deadly Sin. Good pride is akin to self confidence, being courageous, having good self-esteem or a good self-image, challenging yourself in many aspects of your life in a healthy way. You take pride in your skill set or working hard to accomplish a goal. This is the kind of pride Felix Baumgartner displayed, especially when he spoke of the humility he felt when he emerged from that capsule staring down at our earth; he just wanted to get home.

Bad pride is being arrogant, presumptuous, vain, narcissistic, or egocentric. But this type of pride often comes about because of deep-seated insecurities or feelings of worthlessness. [2] This is the kind of pride we see today in our scripture passage from Mark. James and John want to sit at the right and left hands of Jesus. They want the accolades, they want to be special, and they want to be distinguished compared to all the other disciples. Jesus sees right through their demands and their apparent insecurities, this is why he asks them if they really know what they're asking for.

Actually, Jesus tells them, "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?" [3] They say yes, but we know that these same disciples will be the ones who fall asleep in the Garden when Jesus needs them most, and run away when it looks like all is lost. They will be redeemed and be courageous spokesmen for God in later years. And yet, here we see some negative pride flaring up, this need to prove yourself, to distinguish yourself, to lord prestige and power over others. Jesus tells them that this is contrary to his message, "but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all." [4]

This scriptural instance of bad pride makes me consider a very interesting patient I met when I was a hospital chaplain. The first time I met him; he yelled at me and told me to get out of his room. I had just walked in, announced that I was "Lauren, the chaplain," and he went off. He

said, "So you're the chaplain? Well I don't think Jesus came to condemn me, and I don't think that God wants me to burn in hell. I've done some messed up things in my life, but I don't need you to judge me or tell me that you have all the answers." I was blown away by this tirade, especially since all I said was, "Hi, I'm Lauren, the chaplain for this floor." That was it.

And my introduction sparked this intensely negative response from him, maybe he thought I was a religious person sent to convert him or judge him or tell him how sinful and terrible he is as a human being, who knows. When he finished yelling at me, I just said, "Well, I don't think God wants you to burn in hell either. Have a nice day." I turned to leave because frankly I was mad that I just got yelled at for trying to do my job, a job that I was forced to do to become an ordained minister, a job that I didn't want to do in the first place. But he actually stopped me. "Oh," he said, "okay sit down."

This was my first conversation with Tattoo Dave. Dave was a tattoo artist, and he insisted that I call him "Tattoo Dave" because that's what all his friends called him. He was in the hospital with bladder cancer that was beginning to spread throughout his body. He was very sick and in a great deal of pain, both physical and emotional, lying there day after day in that hospital bed examining his life.

We spoke for hours about his family and childhood—his father was abusive and even though the tattoos covered up his arms, you could still see some of the scars. He had a rough life, and a lot of pride. We ended up having great theological conversations. He was a bit of a Universalist, and he loved Jesus. For him, Jesus was the underdog, the little guy, who in his own way stood up to everyone who had power. And Jesus won in the end. Dave loved that. I visited him my last day at the hospital to say goodbye. He sat up in bed the best he could to give me a hug, and ended our many hours of conversation with "Thanks for everything. I'll give you a free tattoo anytime you want. Now get the hell out of here before I cry."

I've never met anyone with more pride than Tattoo Dave. His pride came out in so many ways, but mostly, he was constantly trying to prove himself. He wanted to be the toughest guy you would ever meet, but there were so many insecurities he covered up with his tough outer exterior. He had made mistakes, and he assumed that all religions would condemn him for those mistakes. One of Dave's biggest issues was feeling unlovable and unworthy, that's where the need to prove himself came from.

I'm not sure if I helped him at all, I felt pretty worthless myself during many of our conversations because I just didn't know the right thing to say. Tattoo Dave had so much anger and hurt. The only thing I could do was listen and assure him that God loves him no matter what, and that there is nothing he could have done to hinder God's love. It's there, whether he felt worthy of it or not.

It's like William Sloane Coffin once said, "I'm not okay; you're not okay; but it's okay." [5] That came to be a mantra of mine that summer. Actually, Robin Meyers argues that the answer to the Deadly Sin of Pride may simply and profoundly be an authentic love of yourself. Out of your pride and need to prove yourself, you can find your own Worthiness. We can find peace in the fact that I'm not okay, you're not okay, and that's perfectly okay. We're all worthy of God's love anyway.

When you think about it, hubris and insecurity are both born of the same root problem—we just don't feel worthy. [6] We live in a culture where we're told that we don't look good enough, make enough money, succeed enough in our careers, have a perfect Leave it to Beaver family, and the list goes on and on. And because we are not excelling in every single one of these categories, we're less than or not important enough. It's no wonder that we may feel insecure sometimes, and this insecurity can rear its ugly head in many ways, we could feel angry all the

time or act arrogantly to cover up our own self-consciousness, we could be way too hard on ourselves or exhaust ourselves by trying to prove how wonderful we are to everyone all the time and keep up some façade of perfection.

The good news is that we don't need these negative forms of pride—like arrogance, vanity, and narcissism to make us worthy. The good news is that God loves us already, flaws and all. God loves us whether we're Felix Baumgartner, James and John, Tattoo Dave, or you and me. We're made in the Divine Image, and we need to own it. Nothing we do can separate us from God's love, and we need to believe it.

In the end, I find a great deal of inspiration in these wise words from Marianne Williamson. I wish I had given them to Tattoo Dave, but I discovered them later. So now, for what it's worth, I'll end with them this morning. Williamson says that maybe "our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous? Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small does not serve the world. There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you. We are all meant to shine, as children do. We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It is not just in some of us; it is in everyone. And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others." May it be so. Amen.
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[1] John Tierney, "24 miles, 4 minutes and 834 M.P.H., All in One Jump," October 14, 2012, The New York Times, http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/15/us/felix-baumgartner-skydiving.html?_r=0

[2] Robin Meyers, *The Virtue in the Vice: Finding Seven Lively Virtues in the Seven Deadly Sins*,

[3] Mark 10:38.

[4] Mark 10:43-44.

[5] William Sloane Coffin, as quoted by Robin Meyers in *The Virtue in the Vice: Finding Seven Lively Virtues in the Seven Deadly Sins*, 9.

[6] Robin Meyers, *The Virtue in the Vice: Finding Seven Lively Virtues in the Seven Deadly Sins*, 10.

[7] Marianne Williamson, "A Return to Love," http://www.worldprayers.org/archive/prayers/meditations/our_deepest_fear_is_not.html