

We talk a lot and sing a lot about being servants of God; of being humble and meek in our lives; of finding our own value in that which we do for the Lord. And then we leave the church building and all the noise of our humanness, of our everyday comes barreling in at us; and finding our value in life, discovering who we are and what we have to offer in His name, is a little more difficult than we might think it should be.

There are a number of different events, experiences, and adventures that we use to help us determine what we consider to be our value in this life. Often we rely on others, on those around us, those we look to for support like: family members, friends, teachers, or people we meet up with only once a week or maybe only once every year or so. We rely on these people to build us up, encourage us, help us to become better in this world. We also rely on the perception of those we consider to be our critics, those who we just can't seem to please no matter what we do. We rely on these people to help keep us grounded, to help keep us humble in becoming who we are meant to be. What gets us in trouble is that we sometimes hear only the support, or sometimes only the criticism - Sometimes it's a conscious choice and we choose to listen to only one or the other... And each of those is wrong. One cannot be stronger than the other, it is important that we find balance.

Everybody here has critics; you know who I mean. Most of us have heard from someone at least once in our lives that what we were about to do, the adventure we were about to embark on, was way outside of our talents or abilities.

Someone once said to me that I was too big of a chicken to do anything “real” after high school - “real” back then meant moving away, or going to college. I declared that I was not too big of a chicken to do anything; not only could I, I WOULD do whatever I wanted... There was more, more criticism over little things like wardrobe, the fact that I didn't wear makeup but some felt very strongly that I needed it; my math skills; my acting, singing, and public speaking abilities... you get the idea. And then, 10 months into my senior year in high school, I had absorbed that criticism, it had gotten so deep under my skin that I didn't really know what I was going to do - what I could do - I actually became a bit too afraid to do anything “real”... Too proud to admit that fact, I put on a good game face and talked myself into the idea that I just didn't want to do those things... Some of you know what I'm talking about - particularly that part about talking yourself into the idea that whatever you've come to believe you can't do was something you simply did not want to do and it had nothing at all to do with ability... Maybe your experience is similar to mine, or maybe it was completely different but still net the same results... That's what a critic can do. That's what negative criticism can do to a person - make them feel less than... well, just less than.

Extending on that same life experience, after High School I found there were people who would support me, people who believed in me and my capabilities. I had supporters who encouraged me, praised my academic abilities, exclaimed their pride over my independence, and built me back up to the point where I was confident enough to move away from home and go on to higher education. And I did. I moved literally across the top half - the widest part - of the state and enrolled in school. I was pursuing an education in Theatre and Music - not something someone with little confidence would generally pursue. Perhaps it was the way I carried myself, or the way I spoke, or simply word of mouth; but the fact that I had relatively low self confidence and low self esteem must have spread all the way across the state! I was being encouraged, poked, prodded, and praised to the point where I really started to believe that I was something special -- began to think that I was pretty much "all that"... began to think that maybe I was a little more special than everybody else...

What I was missing was balance. In the beginning, I listened to the critics, really heard everything they said, took it to heart and became kind of a waste - a waste of what God had created me to be; then I listened to the supporters and really heard everything they said and took that to heart and became a little bit too important in my own eyes... What I needed to do was listen to just enough of both of them so I didn't shrink too much from what I was capable of, who God was calling me to be; OR, worse than shrinking, so that I didn't think I was more important than I was; didn't, as my grandmother would say, become "too big for my britches" .

I am certain that most everybody in this building today, most everybody listening to our broadcast, could come up with an example of listening too hard to those critics who knock us down and try to prevent us from becoming who we are meant to be. And if we are REALLY honest, we could think of a time when we might have listened a little too hard to those that help to build us up, to give us confidence, that can inadvertently lead us to believe that we are more, that we are "more better", than we really are.

How many of you have heard of Bruce Nolan? He's not from around here, he's actually a fictional character. How about Jim Carrey? Many know who that is, right? Jim Carrey played the role of Bruce Nolan in the movie titled "Bruce Almighty". As a news correspondent who has his eye on the position of News Anchor, Bruce is quite certain that much of what the network has him reporting on is, in his own words, a "gigantic, ginormous waste of my life!!!" and that these stories he is required to cover don't show the network that he is Anchor material. When Bruce is passed over for the anchor position, and it is given to another reporter, Evan Baxter, Bruce proclaims that he has more talent, more to offer, more experience, and that he is better than Evan Baxter will ever be!!! A series of events transpire, including Bruce proclaiming an insane on-air criticism of the station he works for which gets him fired. At this point Bruce is extremely frustrated and angry and he takes out his frustration on God, blaming Him for all the misfortune and claiming that He, God, is "the one who should be fired."

Declaring that if God would just listen to him, answer his prayers, be there to “fix” it - as he darn well could if he was doing His job... Well then, Bruce wouldn't be in this predicament.

What transpires throughout the rest of the movie is really what being “too big for your britches” is all about.

God calls Bruce on his proclamation that God is the one to be fired, that he, Bruce, could do a better job listening to the people, answering their prayers, a better job at being God; and God gives Bruce all of His power - with the stipulation that Bruce must follow two rules: 1) He can't tell anybody he's God, and 2) He can't mess with free will.

Wow! Can you imagine? I don't know if I could keep that a secret! God himself just confirmed what Bruce knew all along, that he is better than Evan! If he wasn't, why would he have given him all that power? The power of God - imagine holding that much power... imagine what you could do with that... You really would be “all that” wouldn't you? Okay, back to Bruce...

Bruce accepts these rules, these conditions, and heads out to prove to God that He is failing at His job and that Bruce is more than smart enough, good enough, intelligent enough and caring enough to do this God job better than God himself.

Bruce used the power God bestowed upon him to make his own life a little more comfortable and to destroy the career of Evan Baxter. Because well, he could. In destroying Evan's career, he created the opening as “Anchor” for which he had set himself up as the logical choice. In all of his own glory, in his basking in the power he now held, he neglected to see that he was becoming a little bit self absorbed, and he lost Grace, the woman he truly loved. While all of this was happening, Bruce found himself overwhelmed at the number of prayer requests crowding out his own thinking, and so he programmed his computer to receive the prayers; and then to make it easier, he programmed the computer to just answer “yes” to each of them....

In time, and not much I might add, with all those prayers being answered with “yes”, well, You can imagine the chaos that ensued... and that's when Bruce realized he was in way over his head. The world was falling apart! People were arguing, fighting, aggressively laying claim to the yesses they received in answer to their prayers. And Bruce rushed to find God, to give the power back.

In conversation with Bruce, God tells him that the problem is with the people. He says the problem is that people keep looking up. That people want God to do everything FOR them. That what people don't realize is that they have the power to fix things, they don't need God to do everything for them.

We all have the power to “fix” our own lives - we just need to decide that’s what we want to do.

Now, keep in mind, fixing our lives doesn’t mean getting everything we want in the way that we deem best. Fixing our lives doesn’t mean giving everybody else what they want so they quit bugging us - Bruce discovered this, and I am sure that there are parents and children out there who can attest to that same discovery... Fixing our lives means focusing on God, living by the example set before us by Jesus, loving our neighbor as ourselves -- not loving ourselves more than our neighbor or more than God!

When we focus all of our attention on ourselves, and believe we deserve that focus, we are telling people that we are better than, on a higher level than, and deserving of all of our wants, BEFORE they even get some of their needs... Bruce learned this in losing Grace. Grace needed to be loved, she didn’t need the status of her boyfriend being News Anchor, she didn’t need money or fame - she didn’t even want that stuff - she just wanted to be loved. Bruce was so full of himself, so focused on himself, that he didn’t see that...

Remember that second part of the deal God made with Bruce? Remember #2 that said Bruce couldn’t mess with free will? No matter how much power he had - and he had it all - Bruce could not make Grace want to be with him. That was her choice, one she could make because she had free will. It took a while, but Bruce discovered that this is really the key to all of our frustrations - we can’t control others free will no matter what power we hold over them; and this is also the key to all of the joy we experience in life - we have the ability, the free will, to remove ourselves from harmful situations - emotional or physical - bringing more joy to ourselves, and we have the free will to bring joy to others.

We all have free will. Free will to glorify ourselves; free will to revel in our own wonderfulness; free will to turn from those who don’t put us on that pedestal we are certain we so rightly deserve; free will to exclaim our own wonderfulness and be sure others hear about it in a most grandiose way... We also have the free will to cherish the person God made us to be; free will to embrace whatever gift it is that God gave us: the ability to make people laugh, a good ear for listening -which is sometimes all another person needs, the intuition to nurture others -- whatever the gift. And we have the free will to “Let go and Let God”. To let go of our false impressions of ourselves and let God release us from our own behaviors - from the box we put ourselves in. Free will to be the child of God that He created us to be.

God did not create us to be filled with jealousy and selfish ambition. As we heard in today’s reading, wherever you find jealousy and selfish ambition, there is disorder, there is chaos, and this disorder and chaos will bring evil and heartache. This is NOT what any of us really want. This is NOT what we have been taught., and this is NOT the wisdom that comes from God above! We are told that if we have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in our hearts, we need to **stop** bragging and **stop** living in ways that deny the truth! The truth that we are not “better

than”, we are not “All that”. The wisdom we receive from above is pure, and then it is peaceful, gentle, obedient, filled with mercy and good actions, fair, and it is genuine. (James 3:17)

Live in the wisdom of God our Father. Live in the way we have been taught, the way Jesus showed us to live. Don't live in self righteousness and don't get too big for your britches! Live in humble gratitude for all you have because, as taught to us in Matthew: *Those who exalt themselves will be humbled and those who humble themselves will be exalted.* (Matthew 23:12) AMEN