

2021 Narcissism Mark 10:35-45

This lent we have found some Hope from our Savior for our failure, identity, anger, and relationships. Today we look at: Narcissism: Definition - Excessive interest in or admiration of oneself and one's physical appearance. Selfishness, involving a sense of entitlement, a lack of empathy, and a need for admiration. And I'm sure if you look it up, the picture that goes along with it is that of a Pastor – we always want to be right. Our premise today: “Jesus crucifies our pride and gives us a new life to serve in.”

I would never dream myself qualified enough to diagnose someone as a narcissist. But, let's just say, sometimes we all have to interact with someone who, well, is pretty full of themselves. “I got it all figured out. I don't need help.” Or “If they were as smart as me, they wouldn't have their issues.” Or “I deserve this because I did this and I did that and I... and I... and I.”

The awkward reality of the narcissist that finds itself in a counseling office of course is, well, if they are sooo good at everything... why are they in the office with some problem? Usually it's a spouse who dragged them there. And so they come to the office and sit across from me, some amateur that they know so much more than, and they already know what you're going to say, they already, before

you say a word, are ready to discount what you say as foolish, inaccurate, or something they've already considered. Quite the pickle for the amateur counselor.

But it doesn't change the fact that they are there for a reason. And they can't deny that. So the trick when counseling a narcissist is to break through the walls of ego, which many times is a compensation for an insecurity deep down. And that can be hard. I'm certainly no master of breaking through that, they've been putting that wall up for years, so who am I to crack it?

And so the best way I've found to deal with someone who shows a bit of narcissism, is to try and make them come up with the diagnosis and solution on their own. Then they get to be the hero, they get to be the smart one, I get to be the dumb pastor, but at least maybe their spouse can get a little peace, and maybe I can share some law and Gospel.

To do this, sometimes you have to be subtle and guide the conversation until they arrive at a possible remedy that suits their pride. Sometimes it's less subtle. One time, I got out of my chair at the desk, and asked them to sit there. Then I sat in the patient's chair. Then I recount "my" situation (which is actually theirs) to them.

"You're smart, so I need your help. These are my problems. What should I do?"

And they get what I'm doing. I'm not pulling wool over anyone's eyes. But now they have a choice – "do I answer the question rightly, and admit, that we need

some change in the relationship. Or do I be stubborn and try to pretend there is no problem,” but that’s hard to do when you’re in a counseling office. Because she wouldn’t be if you were so perfect.

And so the silver bullet to narcissism is actually very widely available and easily distributed. The silver bullet to narcissism is: trouble. If you are so smart, if you are so put together, if you have everything figured out – then why are you sick?

Why did you not get the promotion? Why did you fail at that task or relationship?

Why are your finances or your sleep or eating or health a mess?

To be sure we are great at explaining a lot of those away. And we are quite impressive at thinking so highly of ourselves. “It’s their fault it failed.” “If you understood the circumstances.” We are very good at excuses. But excuses don’t save you, and if you were so good, you’d triumph over the excuses anyway. Maybe we, especially in lent, can agree to something: We can’t fix all the problems ourselves - the problems in life, the problem of death. No we need someone else for that.

If trouble eventually kills our pride, what can we hope to replace it with then? It’s often thought to be humility. Thinking less of ourselves. And there’s truth here, it isn’t good to go around thinking we are the greatest thing since sliced bread. But the opposite of narcissism is not humility in the sense that we need to start going

around thinking we are worthless or something. CS Lewis writes about the one who is humble: “He will not be thinking about humility: he will not be thinking about himself at all.” And so the opposite of narcissism isn’t worthlessness, it’s as our definition states earlier: empathy.

Empathy: the ability to understand and share the feelings of another. “Hey, Bonehead, stop thinking about saving your pride and start thinking about the lady next to you in tears.” The narcissist is unable and unwilling to even attempt to see the other side of the story. They are unwilling and unable to imagine that another’s justifications or needs or feelings might, even if in part, be valid. As GK Chesterton puts it: “The definition of the true savage is that he laughs when he hurts you; and howls when you hurt him.”

And as we are already thinking smugly about all the narcissists in our lives, let’s not lose focus here. We all do these things. You see it in the toxic political conversation of the day, it goes on in our hearts and minds all day, it goes on as I write a sermon that I want to come off well in, we see it in just how rarely we apologize and how hard it is when we do. We make such grand statements, but then trials come and it’s suddenly “Why me, God!?” Well why not? Did you confess you were a poor, miserable sinner or not? How’s that for a dose of humility? “I deserve temporal and eternal punishment.” But then we whine when it comes our way. You are grass. You are a servant, not above the Master, the Master

who wasn't above suffering so what makes you think you are? Forget my office, are you going to stand in the throne room and say you've got it all figured out? That you are good enough? No, knees will bow before God – even ours.

Recall that Gospel reading where the disciples ask, “Hey Jesus, who is getting the two seats next to your throne? Who gets to be in all the pictures, maybe make a few decisions that aren't up to your paygrade? Maybe get a cup of wine the servants bring?” In verse 38 Jesus asks them if they want a cup of the drink he will be drinking in his glory. They respond, “Oh sure, sounds amazing, we can handle it.” Then the disciples start bickering and being all jealous of each other. Bunch of narcissists there, ya?

Thank God, our Lord isn't selfish. No, He goes to a cross. And on the way there he encounters lies, betrayals, beatings, whippings, spit, nakedness, shame, and nails. And that is how He is lifted up in glory. Yes, because as Jesus tells us, service brings glory in His kingdom. “Whoever would be great among you must be your servant.” And when does he serve us more than when he dies to make us clean? And so in his glory he does have people on his left and right, but it isn't James and John, no those spots are already taken – by the thieves crucified next to him. And the cup they drink isn't lavish wine, it is a sponge of sour wine put up on a hyssop branch. “You do not know what you are asking,” Jesus tells James and John. “Are

you sure you want those seats?” No they don’t, which is why when Jesus is dying, they are hiding afraid, finally realizing they can’t save themselves.

And so as their Master is crucified and they scatter in cowardice - their narcissism is crucified. They finally realize they can’t beat the darkness, nor can we. But Jesus does. So they do not continue in their worthlessness because they see the risen Lord a few days later. And then suddenly it isn’t about their cushy spots, it’s about Him. And then they don’t seek the cushy seats they go forth into a world and they are beaten and killed proclaiming it – and in that respect they share the drink that Jesus did. And what glory is theirs!? Sure, not earthly glory, only death, but in serving the Master and His Kingdom, and His people? Oh, glory we can’t imagine. Glory won and given to them by the King who died to serve.

So, in Christ, their pride is killed as they see how weak they are. But Christ also died for their weakness and sin even as he died for our pride. And by his grace and Spirit he changed them and used them to serve, and he does the same for us!

Jesus did not hang on that cross for himself. He did it not thinking, “me, me, me,” - he was thinking about you. May we celebrate that he gives us all we need – a Savior. “Jesus crucifies our pride and gives us a live to serve in.” Amen.