

“How Well-Pleased Was God?”
 Sermon for 15 December 2024
 Texts: Isaiah 3:1-5; Luke 1:46-55; John 3:16-17

How well-pleased was God? I think we can consider this question on at least five levels. God was pleased enough:

To pardon and forgive us
 To rescue, relieve and redeem us
 To nurture, train and guide us
 To create, supply, provide for us
 To render us delightful to Himself—by adorning and beautifying us

And if we were to unpack these five divine purposes, we would enter into an awareness of the full import of **God so loved the world, that He gave his only begotten Son so that whomsoever believed in/on Him should not perish but have eternal life.** (John 3:16) God’s love towards us is manifest in each of these five purposes.

For the purposes of contrast, let’s consider Whitney Houston’s song lyrics to “The Greatest Love of All.” Whitney Houston is a musical performer and I am sure she has better songs than this one. So while I don’t intend to offend her fans and I am not judging her music as a whole, I am asserting that this song is so full of rot it deserves merciless exposure. Not only is it inane, it is evil; not silly, but deceptive—it’s a lie:

... **I believe the children are our future** (sentimental)
 Teach them well and let them lead the way (Note: education is not salvation—and letting them lead is preposterous.)
 Show them all the beauty they possess inside (and what about the evil within—shouldn’t we include the good, the bad and the ugly?)
 Give them a sense of pride to make it easier (pride is what did us in!)
 Let the children's laughter remind us how we used to be (so shallow)

... **Everybody searching for a hero** (except for her, she’s her own hero)
 People need someone to look up to
 I never found anyone who fulfills my needs (something God alone can do—where’s God?)
 A lonely place to be (of course, you are such a tiny package)
 And so I learned to depend on me (and how’s that going for you?)

... **I decided long ago**
 Never to walk in anyone's shadows (I’m no disciple)
 If I fail, if I succeed (we all do this)
 At least I'll live as I believe (but who achieves this?)
 No matter what they take from me (so fatalistic!)
 They can't take away my dignity (well, actually they can . . . and have)

... **Because the greatest love of all**
 Is happening to me (true enough—but it’s not you)
 I found the greatest love of all
 Inside of me (no, it comes knocking)

The greatest love of all
 Is easy to achieve (why have so few attained it?)
 Learning to love yourself (Until you're forgiven, you can't)
 It is the greatest love of all (very ignorant, self-absorbed)

I am unsure that there is a better summation of the hubris, the overweening pride, of our generation than that expressed here! Let's acknowledge that there is precedent for "**I Believe that children are our future . . . let them lead the way**" in Scripture. But the setting in Scripture is very divergent from Whitney Houston's world in this song:

**And the wolf will dwell with the lamb,
 And the leopard will lie down with the young goat,
 And the calf and the young lion [will feed together or] and the fatling
 together;
 And a little boy (some render this child) will lead them.**

However, the scenario here is that of the Messiah's kingdom, wherein his rule, and his righteousness prevails—hardly a picture of this our present world order! The shift of setting makes all the difference. In the coming kingdom, there is trust, universal defenselessness because of the prevailing peace! In that new order, a vegan paradise has supplanted the carnivorous world we are acquainted with. We may be fairly certain that Whitney Houston doesn't have a messianic reign, or kingdom in view! "Children's laughter" is supposed to remind "us how we used to be." Originally innocent? Good?

What Isaiah 3:1-5 expresses is a severe judgment upon a rebellious and idolatrous nation of Judah—such as I fear we have become
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God Will Remove the Leaders—in Judgment

**3 For behold, the Lord [a]God of hosts is going to remove from
 Jerusalem and Judah
 Both [b]supply and support, the whole [c]supply of bread
 And the whole [d]supply of water;
 2 The mighty man and the warrior,
 The judge and the prophet,
 The diviner and the elder,
 3 The captain of fifty and the honorable man,
 The counselor and the expert artisan,
 And the skillful enchanter.
 4 And I will make mere lads their princes,
 And [e]capricious children will rule over them,
 5 And the people will be oppressed,
 Each one by another, and each one by his neighbor;
 The youth will storm against the elder
 And the inferior against the honorable.¹**

¹Footnotes

- a. Isaiah 3:1 Heb *YHWH*, usually rendered *Lord*
- b. Isaiah 3:1 Lit *staff*

No, behind Houston's line is a belief in the essential goodness (and purported innocence) of children. Isaiah rightly sees them as "tyrants and oppressors," as agents of disruptive impulsivity and for the sinners they naturally are. The adults in the room are supposed to be the leaders! Good, morally responsible and mature men are to administer justice to those who submit to the word of God through their instruction and rulings. In opposition to this Whitney has learned not to trust others, to "only depend on me."

Forget the wisdom of the more experienced and mature, lean on yourself and wing it! In this attitude, the idolatry of self we languish under is fully exposed. It follows from the assumption that we are so good we need no savior—despite "wanting someone to look up to!" And we have no God who meets our every need either!—not in this progressive utopia. The self-made man thrives in his socially constructed universe of significance; until he doesn't. He is utterly egotistical and thereby damned.

"I decided long ago, Never to walk in anyone's shadows" is the death knell for Christian discipleship. Jesus says, "Follow me," and the rebellious Whitney, she's nobody's fool(!), she will follow her ignorant self. Given what she appears to believe, I don't hold out much hope for her success. And she will have herself to blame—but she is good with that! Is this maturity, or surly insolence?! The horrid truth is this: she has no dignity to be taken away. There is no need to take away something that doesn't exist. To obtain respect requires one to be respectable—as in to live respectfully.

Look within, search within is the motto, or siren song of psychology that saturates this song—translated nakedly asserts that salvation depends on us, depends on the introspection—getting in touch with that "goodness." Once again Scripture is non-compliant. Didn't Jesus say, **Why do you call me good? None is good but God alone.** That nullifies this quest for the good within—it simply doesn't exist. This turning within is a fool's errand, not the counsel of a wise friend.

And then there's this: "The greatest love of all is easy to achieve . . . learning to love yourself." I can tell you with assurance, based on forty-plus years of pastoral experience. Love is not easy. And love of self, properly speaking, is the most difficult to achieve. It is self-flattery to claim to love yourself. For we know that we love God because he first loved us.

Well, by now you've learned much of Houston's awful, misleading song and you have completely lost track of my theme. I set out to expound on divine love through a five-fold description of God's pleasure in us. How pleased was he? So, here is a refresher. God was pleased enough in love:

To pardon and forgive us
 To rescue, relieve and redeem us
 To nurture, train and guide us
 To create, supply, provide for us

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- c. [Isaiah 3:1](#) Lit *staff*
 - d. [Isaiah 3:1](#) Lit *staff*
 - e. [Isaiah 3:4](#) Lit *arbitrary power will rule*

To render us delightful to Himself—by adorning and beautifying us

The whole gamut of these five purposes is played out for us in Ezekiel 16 which begins with an exposé of Jerusalem’s abominations. It begins with the nativity of an infant girl. Interestingly, Christmas is about the nativity of an infant boy. She was unwanted, and cast out new-born, abandoned in a field to die. Jesus, on the other hand, was a wanted child. As the Promised One he had been longed for, desired, yes, wanted for ages and ages. There was great joy and exultation at his birth. A huge canyon is stretched between this birth of Jesus and this pitiful little girl. That infant’s navel was not cut; she was not washed, rubbed with salt and not swaddled at all! [This treatment is a fatal recipe for death—it is to be unwanted all spelled out!] Of course not, infanticide was the purpose for her disposal. But God was pleased to take pity on her, and seeing her polluted in her blood and he was pleased to command life to her. **Live! I have caused thee to multiply as the bud of the field.** In 250 years they had increased from 75 persons to 800,000! She was born and preserved to be married to God, adorned to be his bride. So there we have “rescue, relieve and redeem” second piece. There follows the “create, supply and provision piece,” the fourth purpose of divine love. Of course, the larger display of paradise underscores this same purpose. The third purpose, “nurture, train and guide” piece is instigated. She sinned, despised her benefactor, trusted in her own beauty to provide for her and whored herself out. Yet God so loved her that he forgave her, restored her, and kept her for himself! *He persistently chose to be pleased with her—and so he is with those who love him, those whom Christ has redeemed!*

The Ezekiel narrative details a story of prodigious love—very like the prodigal son parable which parallels the story of Jacob’s sons, particularly of Judah! This is the “pardoning and the forgiveness” part of God’s favor—the first purpose which expresses redemptive love. And the fifth and final piece points us to the restoration of the younger son (a ring, robe and sandals account for beautification and restoration). Yes, boy or girl makes no difference at all when it come to the love that searches for us, and claims us!

Amen.