

YOU ARE IMPORTANT

Scripture Reading: Ephesians 3:14-19, RSV

It would be fascinating to write the history of each student graduating from Sligo Adventist School this week.

What to be proud of,
ashamed of.

What Joys, fun times,
pain, hurt.

How the students feel about themselves. Do they even like themselves? Do they wish they could be different in some way? Would they like to be better looking? Smarter? More athletic? Wealthier? Had more personality? Had some of the exciting, attractive friends some other people seems to have. Do they wish they could get invited to parties attended by the most popular kids?

We hear a great deal about how Christianity can teach you to love other people, to care about them, to respect and admire them.

I want to talk about how to like *yourself*, to respect and admire yourself. There are two places you get the first feelings about yourself:

1. Parents and other adults
2. Friends in school.

Some of you students may have encountered an adult like the coach at Little League games: "You stink as a player. I don't know why I bother to come out and coach you, why anyone bothers to spend money on good equipment; you can't play!"

The beautiful kids, people pick up, hug, fuss over. The ugly ones, the deformed or crippled children, very quickly get the idea that there is something about them that drives adults away. They cannot miss the message!

As students get older, they all vent friends, dates with attractive, intelligent, "cool" people? What happens to the others? Because we don't like them much, they learn not to like themselves.

I would like to tell you a story about one such young boy. His mother was a powerfully built, dominating woman who found it difficult to love anyone. Married three times; the second husband left her because she beat him up regularly. The third husband fathered this boy. The boy never knew his father because he died before the boy was born.

The mother had no time or inclination to care about him. He received no affection, no training no discipline. The mother told him not to call her at work; she was rarely at home.

The other children avoided him; he was alone most of the time. From his earliest childhood, he was

YOU ARE IMPORTANT

rejected, ugly, poor and unlovable. When he was 13 years old, a school psychologist commented that he probably didn't even know the meaning of the word "love."

As a teenager the girls avoided him like the plague and he fought with the other boys all the time. He had a high IQ, but failed school. He dropped out and joined the marines. He wanted to be respected but the guys in the marines laughed at him, bullied and ridiculed him. He fought back. He disobeyed orders. He was finally dismissed with an undesirable discharge. In his early twenties, he had no friends and no future. He was a small, scrawny man with a high-pitched voice, balding prematurely, with no talents and no skills—not even a driver's license.

He ran away from his problems to a foreign country. There he encountered the same pattern of rejection. He married a girl who had been an illegitimate child and brought her back to America with him. Seeing everyone else's contempt for him, she too began to dislike him.

She had two children by him but he never enjoyed the status and respect he felt he deserved as a husband and father. She demanded more and more from him. The marriage began to collapse. She opposed him, fought with him, pushed him around—even locked him in the bathroom one time as punishment--then forced him to leave.

He tried to make it on his own but he was terribly lonely. After some days he crawled back to her on hands and knees and asked for another chance. He humiliated himself. He came on her terms, gave her all his little earned money. She laughed at him, made fun of him. At one point he fell on his knees and cried bitterly.

Then there was silence. No more pleading or begging; he was a strangely different man.,- He went to the garage and got a rifle he had hidden there. He took it with him to his new job at a storage building.

And from a window on the third floor of that building, shortly after noon on November 22, 1963, Lee Harvey Oswald sent two shells crashing into the head of President John Kennedy. (Story from *Hide or Seek* by Dr. James Dobson, Revell Company.)

His grief and shame about his own inferiority and worthlessness turned to rage.

There may be some like him even here in this class. Not that they would respond so extremely, but feel it just the same.

Psychologists tell us that the vast majority of the young between 12 and 20 are bitterly disappointed with who they are and what life has given them. They want to look in the mirror and see O. J. Simpson or Cheryl Tiegs and all they see is a bad case of acne. Very few grow up accepting themselves as they are.

Why? Because this world of sin and evil has given us a system for judging people's worth that is unjust and unchristian.

I. The first criterion is beauty. Even when a baby is first born, the parents have got to tell everyone how beautiful the baby is.

The trouble is that most babies are rather homely. They're not ever going to be asked to be a Gerber's baby food model. And we adults respond differently to an ugly baby than we do to an outstandingly beautiful one. And our response has a tremendous impact on that baby's personality.

As the child grows, this reaction is reinforced. Look how much attention a movie star or a Miss America receives! But the homely are not asked to be cheerleaders.

Even children's stories reflect this attitude:

- a. Ugly duckling—becomes beautiful swan.
- b. Sleeping beauty—who'd kiss the sleeping ugly?
- c. Dumbo the elephant—big ears—until he could do something no one else could do, he was ridiculed.
- d. Snow White and the seven dwarfs--Snow White "was the fairest of them all."
- e. Cinderella—prettier than her stepsisters.

Bible stories are different--Mephibosheth was a cripple. Jesus did not stand out in a crowd because of physical beauty. Paul was small and had a visual handicap. But Absalom was handsome!

Greatness depends on qualities of character, honesty, courage, love, kindness and faithfulness. All of us can have these if we want. These qualities do not depend on genes and chromosomes; they can be developed.

Fundamentally you are of tremendous value because you are created by God in his image. Your self-esteem is to come from this, not looks or a face that can be ruined in an accident, not from intelligence that can be used for the most evil and selfish of reasons, not for athletics that are often trivial.

You were created for God and for others, for their joy and salvation.

Often schoolchildren are cruel to one another. This is tragic. Christian education tries to change this but often fails. Kids often attack each other and destroy self-esteem—the ability to like one's self.

Dr. Dobson also refers to the story of a very brutal note received by an overweight 4th grade girl. The note was so vicious that there is no doubt she will remember it with shame and embarrassment all of her life.

II. Intelligence and athletics.

This reflects on the parents again—"Chip off the old block."

Even the prophet Samuel was tricked by this:

Don't judge by a man's face or height, for this (David's brother) is not the one. I don't make

YOU ARE IMPORTANT

decisions the way you do. Men judge by outward appearance, but I look at a man's thoughts and intentions. (*Living Bible*)

Advertising tactics promote the bright young people who look good in bathing suits.

There are few rewards for honesty, integrity, humor, loyalty, patience, etc.—at least not on this earth.

Young people, our Scripture reading tells you that you are extremely important and valuable for who you are, for your inward graces and beauty.

Don't buy the devil's sales pitch that people are only worth something if they are gorgeous or smart or a super athlete—it's a lie.

The truth is that those who possess true beauty and greatness may never be seen by those of us in the world. We look on the face and height as Samuel did and not on the inward thoughts and intentions.

Jesus died because you are important to him. He will never ask about your looks, your brains, your baseball ability or your personality. They're not that important. He asks only if you love him, and love others and love the poor.

Graduates, I hope you answer those questions to yourself—and to Jesus—with a resounding YES.