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Some years back, there was a report on Iowa Public Radio about the human need to be liked. The report focused on the human tendency to need the approval of a person who clearly shows dislike or disapproval towards you. The study showed that people overwhelmingly seek the approval of a person who does not like them verses being content with the approval of ones who do like them. An example they used is customers' tendency to leave a larger tip for a waiter or a waitress who showed them indifference; contrary to the assumption that customers would leave a larger tip for a server who is super nice to them. This is based on the human need to be liked. The larger tips are an attempt to buy approval.

Seems like something we should leave behind in junior high school, but this need often intensifies as people age. The sad verdict—we never outgrow the need to win the approval of others.

And this is exhausting.

Like is stamped by the unrelenting pattern to win or earn or buy or manipulate other people into like us. The games change slightly as we move from childhood to adulthood, but the motivation is the same—the need to be accepted and approved of by others, especially those who don't like me.

John the Baptist knew this game. He was a Nazarite, meaning he took a vow to never cut his hair, to never drink wine, and to never become impure by touching a dead

body. He observed strict dietary restrictions. He lived apart from the community. He abstained from physical pleasure. He stayed away from the graves in order to not become ritually tainted. He was a good Nazarite. Yet, because of these things, people ridiculed him and said he was evil. And so he was thrown in jail and beheaded.

So then Jesus came along, and he did exactly the opposite. He lived in community. He feasted and drank wine, even going so far as to change water into wine at a wedding banquet. He touched the dying all the time, and he even went further than that by raising the dead back to life. And he was ridiculed for it. And he was arrested for it. And he was executed for it.

So, neither of these men scored very high in their approval ratings. And they were polar opposites. Neither one of them managed to get everybody to like them. Even Jesus had enemies, of course he did, otherwise he wouldn't have ended up on the cross...

So, then, if we finally admit the hard truth that we cannot win the approval of others, whose approval do we seek? Approval of my self?

No, that's an even more depressing game....

Because no matter how much disapproval we get from others, it paled in comparison to the opinion we hold of ourselves. Just ask Saint Paul about this. We learned about him last week...how he tortured and killed Christians in his previous life, and how his guilt tormented him in his later life, even as he spread the Gospel of Jesus and started churches and baptized thousands of people. He still thought he was a worm.

In his letter today, he writes, “I don't do the good things I want to do! Instead, I do the very bad things I don't want to do!” Sound familiar? Of course it does. It's the ancient human predicament. It's the flip side to having free will. It means we never choose the good....the same reason why we choose to eat Dairy Queen blizzards instead of baby carrots and broccoli.

So there's the hard truth. We choose the bad, and because of that, we suffer in our relationships with each other and with ourselves. And because those relationships suffer, we feel like nobody likes us. And because we feel like nobody likes us, we despair and lose hope and feel alone and then, out of sheer desperation, we do whatever we have to to get others to like us, which is what this morning's Gospel is all about...we sing and dance and perform and act to try to get others to like us, and we get mad when they don't. We then weep and wail and throw tantrums in order to get attention, and we get mad when people walk away.

It's exhausting.

Jesus has something to say to us about that.

Come to me, you tired, worn-out people...come to me, and I will give you rest.

We might disappoint other people, and we might disappoint ourselves, but we will not disappoint the one who created us, the one who lived to love us, the one who died to save us. His, then, is the only approval that matters.

In seminary, at my senior graduation ceremony, the guest speaker told us, “In your

typical congregation, 30% of the people will love you no matter what you do, 30% of the people will hate you no matter what you do, and the remaining 40% just don't give a damn. Now, go out there and have fun!” Even pastors disappoint. Even the church disappoints. But Jesus will not disappoint us, because his love is constant and doesn't depend on whether or not we look like him or think like him or agree with him. His love is pure grace, and isn't given to the best dancer or the loudest singer or the noisiest whiner...his love is poured out on all people, flowing freely from the cross.

Some might find it offensive that God's love is for everyone, but not if you've ever been the hated one or the laughed-at one or the one left out or the one tired to your bones by a life of song and dance, because if you've ever been one of those things, you find no offense at sharing something so pure it cannot be bought or earned or won...a love that is simply received and adored and marveled at.