For the Southwest Chicago Christian Schools Annual Prayer and Praise Service
August 27, 2006
Egocentrism/Living Beyond Ourselves

I’d like begin with a word: Egocentrism. Egocentrism. There’s a word that might be new to many of you. It’s a word we use around our house sometimes, because it sums up a problem children often have, heard in the words “I want it,” “It’s mine,” “I get to watch my show,” “It’s my turn for the computer.”

I’d like us to better understand egocentrism, look at Jeremiah 31 and Matthew 22, and explore living within the covenant so to live beyond our selves.

So first, more about egocentrism. “I want it.” “It’s mine.” “I get to watch my show.” “It’s my turn for the computer.”

Did you hear the dominant word in all of those statements? “I,” “I,” “I.” Egocentric simply means being overly concerned about oneself. I probably shouldn’t tell you this, but we’ve been so afflicted with it over these years that all we have to do is look at our son Paul with that knowing look when he’s being self-centered, and he says in response “I know, egocentric.”

But I suspect that egocentrism is not only present in my family, but in your families, in your communities, in this country, in this world!

Students. You probably rarely voice the words “I want it.” “It’s mine.” “I get to watch my show.” “It’s my turn for the computer.” And if you do, it’s probably because you think you’ve been treated unfairly. That sister of yours probably has had the computer way too long. Or that brother has been watching only the cartoons he wants to watch on Saturday morning, not giving you a turn.

Yes, you probably voice those words because it seems unfair. And sometimes it probably is unfair. But, if you’re honest, sometimes it’s just because you want what you want…now.

I suspect, too, that you’ve had the response from your parents that goes something like this: “When I was your age, I didn’t have a car. I didn’t have a computer” (and you laugh to yourself, because your parents are so old, they didn’t even have computers back then). Some may even say, “When I was your age, I had to walk three miles to school…uphill both ways!”

But parents and grandparents, despite that we didn’t grow up in this age of abundance—in fact, there are some here tonight that grew up in the opposite age—the depression, we are also guilty of egocentrism. We often confuse what we need with what we want. You can think of your own examples of this.

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Egocentrism isn’t new, you know. The Old Testament is filled with stories of whining and complaining. Those Israelites who were given safe passage across the lake bed of the Red Sea spent more time looking out for themselves than looking to God. They said “If only we had died by the Lord’s hand in Egypt. There we sat around pots of meat and ate all the food we wanted, but you have brought us out into this desert to starve this entire assembly to death.” (Exodus 16:3) And “Why did you bring us up out of Egypt to make us and our children and our livestock die of thirst?” (Exodus 17:3)

Much later, the Israelites looked around, saw that other countries had kings, and said to Samuel “we want a king.” Then came the reigns of Saul, David, and Solomon, followed by reign after reign of kings that were just as egocentric as their people…and eventually, the nations of Judah and Israel were no more.

So what’s the solution to this age-old problem of egocentrism? How do we turn away from egocentrism and look beyond ourselves? There are many, many texts in both the Old and New Testament we could use, but let me suggest this text from Matthew 22:37-39:

> Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second like it: Love your neighbor as yourself.”

Notice, self is not first, God is first. Then, take that love of self and insert, instead, your neighbor. Self is clearly not first.

So how then shall we live…beyond ourselves? If God and neighbor are first, are we just doormats? Never being concerned about ourselves? In the remaining minutes, I’d like to focus on only one dimension of how to live for God, neighbor, and self in a way that honors this teaching and points the next generation in the proper direction…and provides the basis for Christian education.

The answer, very simply, is to live in relationship with God. Now, I’d like to quickly point out that, we can, unfortunately, even make relationship with God something that’s egocentric. It’s a uniquely recent and an American thing to say “I have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ.” I’m afraid that statement seems to begin with self, not God. Maybe it would be more accurate to say “God has a relationship with his people, so I seek to be faithful to him.”

You see, that relationship isn’t about us simply choosing one day to love God and offering our lives to him. That’s just the response to something far bigger than ourselves. It’s all about God, not all about us. God is the architect of relationships, and he has drawn and redrawn the blueprint for relationships throughout history. And that blueprint is called a covenant. Remember some of the covenants?

> God promised never again to destroy the earth after the flood.
> God promised that from Abraham would come a great nation.
And then in Jeremiah 31:31-34 God made a new promise or covenant:

“The time is coming,” declares the Lord, “when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them, declares the Lord. This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time,” declares the Lord. “I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God and they will be my people.”

We are people of this new covenant. And notice, please, that it starts with God, not with us. “I will be their God, and they will be my people.”

Notice, too, that God focuses on the group. God doesn’t say “I will be his God, or I will be her God, and she will be my person” even though God is as individual toward us as is a loving father or mother. Understand first, however, that God established his first covenant with a family group—the descendants of Abraham—but then extended it—made a new covenant, by sending his Son to form a new community of adopted children and heirs.

So, let’s back up and review: how do we live beyond ourselves?

1. We love God with all of our hearts and with all of our souls and with all of our minds.
2. We love our neighbor at least as much as we love ourselves.
3. We remember that we are people of the new covenant.

So, not much room for egocentrism here. Moreover, faith isn’t a matter of personal choice. It’s a matter of response to God’s love—so much that he sacrificed his son on the cross.

And so, for our children, it’s not like going to the Old Country Buffet: “Take want you want.” “It’s all about you, that your needs would be satisfied.” No, as parents, we must recall each day that these are covenant children. God has made promises to them. We have a responsibility to train them, to educate them to respond to those promises.

Home is key and so is school. Frankly, I can’t imagine education, preschool through college, that doesn’t operate on this basic foundation. Any wonder that our society is self centered and self absorbed? When the number one criterion is “the best for my child” parents choose the best school—as measured by all of the comforts and accoutrements of this world. The best pool, the best weight room, the best science lab, the best AP courses, the best reading program. And the result? An over indulged child who grows up to live for him or her self.
Contrast that with education at home and school where God is first, not self. I’m not against the best science lab, the best reading program, or the best weight room. But these must be means to an end...always to love God with our hearts, souls, and yes, minds.

Parents, our children are growing up in an age of abundance. And everything about this age of abundance screams Me, Me, Me. It’s an egocentric world we live in. So we must work hard against this—to truly live beyond ourselves. We have not been given this generation of children and teens to add to legions of self-absorbed egocentric young adults you can find at any mall or concert venue. We have been given the responsibility of this generation to help them love the Lord and their neighbor as themselves...and we’ve been given the covenant as the set of promises, a blueprint, God gives us within which to provide this training--training that points to God, not to self. It’s a responsibility we must accept.

So there you have it. We should flee from egocentrism into the arms of our covenant God, and, so doing, learn to live beyond ourselves. So how are we doing?

If we look in the past, we have an incredible legacy. This group of believers, grandparents and supporters, have and continue to do amazing things in their support of Christian education, K-16. In one generation, this constituency has birthed a college and its campus, the high school was built and relocated from the city, and the Tinley Park facility was launched. All in the last four decades or so. Moreover, during this same time, Roseland transitioned and Elim continued to expand. Praise God for this testimony.

But what will be our future? I’d like to suggest we can learn something from General Motors. As GM grew and grew and grew in recent years, their distinctiveness began to fade. Each division had a bunch of models, none all that distinct from models in another division. It was hard to tell a Pontiac from a Chevy from a Buick from an Olds. It seems as if the more models they introduced, the fewer cars they ended up selling, until finally, they began to wake up. They recognized that they had lost distinctiveness. So, they got rid of Oldsmobile, and are working on a product line with distinctiveness.

Why do I mention this? We mustn’t lose our distinctiveness. A generation or two back, we were more homogenous—nearly all were from one denomination, from one ethnic group. Maybe our distinctiveness was that we were an immigrant group, clinging together. The good news is that God is beginning to assemble his diverse family, from every tribe, nation, and tongue, right here. But, as God blesses us in this new day, let’s not slide into being the old GM and lose our distinctiveness as we grow.

Last week, someone at Trinity told me that he had run into one of our recent graduates. This graduate had transferred to Trinity from another Christian college. He told of how important Trinity had been to developing his faith. The previous Christian college had surrounded him with rules and regulations; Trinity had helped him respond to God and God’s world. I think it’s because of our distinctive approach to Christian education.
Some say our distinctiveness is rooted in our reliance on the broad biblical themes of creation, fall, redemption, and restoration. How true this is. Knowing that the world God created is tainted thoroughly by the fall, we are to be used by the Holy Spirit to join in God’s work of restoration. Such belief gives rise to living beyond ourselves in all kinds of endeavors—endeavors in the sciences, endeavors in the trades, endeavors in the professions, endeavors in the home, endeavors in business, and endeavors in the arts. When these schools send forth carpenters and computer programmers, these graduates aren’t just building houses and writing computer programs for egocentric reasons. They are focused on God and his kingdom, doing their best, trying to make the world a place a little more like God intended it.

Our distinctiveness is also found in our understanding of the covenant. Not all of our fellow Christian brothers and sisters focus on this, but these schools steeped in this Reformed tradition do. And why is that?

At one level, we might say that “because it takes a village to raise a child.” Yes, that African proverb gets at how covenant Christian education is a group affair. Our homes individually cannot raise, train, or educate a child all by themselves. God extended his covenant to a group.

At another level, we focus on the covenant because it’s God-centered instead of self-centered. The most recent issue of Christianity Today came to our mailbox yesterday and the feature article is YOUNG, RESTLESS, and REFORMED. You should read the article, for it says that young people long for what is deep and significant for their faith. In the article is this quote in reference to a growing appeal to the young: “You know what, it’s not about us, it’s about God’s glory, it’s about his renown.….that’s the first step down a pathway of Reformed theology. Because if you say that it’s not about you, then you’re on that road of saying it’s not about your actions, your choosings, your determination.”

Yes, our approach to Christian education is distinctive because it rests on doctrine that says our only hope is not in me and my decisions. My only hope is that I am not my own, but I belong, body and soul, in life and in death, to my faithful savior Jesus Christ. This isn’t a promise built on or initiated by the whims of a fickle human person. This is a promise given by God and sealed with his covenant.

These things—reliance on the biblical themes of creation, fall, redemption, restoration, and a reliance on what God does, not what we do—make this Christian education distinctive. Of course, our desire to be clear about these things which make us distinctive isn’t to sell more cars as it is with General Motors. Our desire to be clear about our distinctives helps us avoid chasing after the latest fad or the fanciest school. Our desire to be clear about our distinctives gives witness to our reliance on God’s Word faithfully interpreted from generation to generation. Our desire to be clear about our distinctives sends us not to live for ourselves, but to live in the embrace of God’s covenant, to truly live beyond ourselves—for God and his kingdom,

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In this coming year, thank God for these schools and what makes them distinctive.

**Students**, know that the education you receive is wholly centered on God and God’s world, and not centered on whether you get an A or win the game….as wonderful as those accomplishments are.

**Teachers and staff**, remember that you, we are part of the sacred trust that God has initiated with the covenant.

**Parents**, know that a priority for Christian education is the most far-reaching and rewarding abundance that you can ever give your children.

**Grandparents**, embrace these schools with your prayers and support, for they have such an important role in rightly preparing these young people for God’s church and world.

And let us all “promise to receive these children, teens, and young adults in love, pray for them, help instruct them in the faith, and encourage and sustain them in the fellowship of believers.”

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2 Christian Reformed Church Baptism form.