

Sermon: The Rev. Poulson Reed
September 20, 2009
Proper 20 B – “The Practice of Humility”

In the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Well, I’m sure you all would really like to hear me preach on “a capable wife is more precious than jewels.” And I’d have some things to share on that topic, because my wife Megan certainly does qualify, and more.

But that would be way too embarrassing for her, and so instead, I’m going to focus our attention on our gospel reading today. I’m sure Megan is relieved.

Here again, in Mark’s gospel, we find the disciples not understanding what Jesus is saying. Often this happens when Jesus is speaking in metaphors or parables, but here they are confused even when he is speaking in a straightforward way. “The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again.” All this was a true prediction of what was to happen to him, but they could not grasp it. And later in the passage, we find out why.

“They were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest.” Even the disciples, those closest followers of Jesus, still thought of the world in terms of status. No wonder they couldn’t comprehend their great leader being betrayed and killed, even if he would rise again. This was not the savior they had in mind, the great conqueror who would subdue all his and their enemies under his feet.

And yet, if we were to summarize Jesus’ life and ministry in one single virtue, that virtue would be humility. “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.” It was an unpopular and poorly-understood way of living then, and it is even more so now.

Humility is perhaps the most challenging of all the virtues to practice. Think about it. Ours is a culture that doesn’t even value humility that much to begin

with. Self-confidence, self-reliance, self-promotion, self-esteem – we hear about these all the time.

When was the last time you saw a movie or TV hero or heroine or read a newspaper article about someone who was truly, genuinely humble? It happens, but it's rare.

That's the nature of humility – it doesn't often get noticed, and it doesn't want to. Humility is about “we,” not “me.” It is not false modesty, shunning attention, secretly hoping that more attention will come your way *when everyone finds out that really great thing you did*. Real humility is giving up what is dear to you for the sake of others, and genuinely not caring if anyone ever gives you any credit for doing it.

Not giving what you didn't really mind giving up, but what you least wanted to lose, because someone else needed it more than you did. When we hear about these acts of true humility: a soldier throwing himself on a bomb for his fellow soldiers, the anonymous person who pays people's delinquent mortgages, we pause for a moment in silent awe.

Think about Jesus. As his agonizing time in the garden the night before his crucifixion clearly shows, he didn't want to give his life for the sake of others, certainly not to the point of an excruciating death. And still, nearly every moment of Jesus' public ministry, after he came out of his 40 days of discernment in the wilderness, was characterized by doing something for the sake of others, and not for himself.

In all the stories of healing and teaching, of preaching and miracles, not once is Jesus doing any of it for his own benefit, or to draw attention to himself, except in pointing, through him, to the power and love of God. He rejects as the devil's temptation using his power even to feed himself when he was hungry.

A popular book on leadership says that it's amazing how much can get done in an organization if no one cares who gets the credit. And it's true. Look at groups, large or small, that are really healthy and working well. Successful corporations or schools or sports teams or churches or families.

If you look under the surface, you're likely to find a lot of humble people at all levels of involvement, from the top on down. You'll find a culture of humility. The meek shall inherit the earth, but they get a lot done, too, in the meanwhile.

We're all likely to experience being humbled at some point in our lives. In fact, it's a guarantee that we will. Either we'll be humbled by ourselves, voluntarily, because we know that imitating Christ means emptying ourselves of our selfish pride and ambition. Or we'll reach higher and higher, trusting in ourselves rather than God, and eventually, we'll be brought low. The bigger our egos are, the harder we fall.

Random acts of nature, disease, financial devastation: all can be horrific lessons in humility. The word "humility" shares a root with the word for earth, "humus," and it's easy to see why. How small we are, our buildings, our ambitions, our bodies in the face of the earth's power or cancer or the economy's whims.

In times like these, we are reminded of what matters most – the blessings of this life, our families, sacrifice for the sake of others in great need, and faith in our compassionate God, who understands suffering, and suffers with us.

Recently, at our lowest economic point, in the midst of so much financial destruction and hardship, the generosity of our nation has appeared in interesting ways, reminding us that our lives are not only about ourselves. While some have hunkered down in this recession, holding tight to what they have, others have reached out to help those in need.

New charities have started, and new initiatives, formal and informal, have begun in churches to extend a hand to those who need it. Here at All Saints', I've heard of and seen individuals and groups helping others who have lost jobs and homes. Out of darkness, in our humility, new, resurrected life is emerging. The collective practice of humility, people giving sacrificially in quiet ways, is finding new places here to grow.

Could it be that we've had it wrong, most of the time? Could it be that fulfillment, being filled full, isn't about self-help, or finding ourselves; that the answer isn't found looking inside ourselves at all? Is it possible that we'll never find our purpose, our deepest happiness by looking within?

Is it possible, instead, that there is a paradox at the heart of meaning, that our greatest fulfillment comes when we have most emptied ourselves for a purpose? Could our happiness lie in denying ourselves, humbling ourselves, recognizing that God has a greater plan for each of us than we could even imagine? Could humbling ourselves, imitating Christ, help us find our true, God-made selves?

Could the ordinary practices of humility: confession, listening, speaking well of others, forgiveness and reconciliation, and being grateful for God's gifts to us – could these be the keys to happiness, as well?

For each one of us, this morning, what would it mean to empty ourselves, each in our own way, and be obedient to God? What would it look like, in the words of the letter of James from today, if each of us strove to be “pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy”?

If we were to humble ourselves, to look out for the interests of others, to give sacrificially for their needs, disregarding our own, what might happen? What grace, what divine grace might rush into our self-made emptiness, filling us full to overflowing with a strange joy, a sense of peace we had not previously known? Amen.