

Ancient Wisdom on Humility¹

Several of you expressed your agreement two weeks ago that so much of the recent direction of our culture is towards unprecedented self-promotion. A voice whispers in our ear: "You're kind of a big deal, you need to live like a little god."

Our faith, in contrast, moves in the opposite direction. Exalt yourself, we read in the Bible, and you will be brought low. But go down, as Jesus went down, and you will find yourself lifted up."

I'd like to use our sermon time today restating a classic Christian guideline on humility, that of the Italian father of the monastic movement, St. Benedict of Nursia.² Benedict was writing for monks back in the 6th Century. He wanted to give them a step-by-step checklist of the process of becoming humble. What Benedict wrote slams into our lifestyle, so beware, these ideas aren't being diluted to make it comfortable for us. Nevertheless, I believe that these pointers will open the door into a fresh closeness with the way of Jesus and the nature of being a person of God.

Benedict gives us twelve steps that I'll restate in the language of today:

The First Step is that we simply acknowledge that there is a God who is really there and cares for us. All pride and all sin is an attempt to dethrone God and become our own little gods. When we put

¹ Douglas DeCelle preached this sermon on January 31, 2010 at the First Presbyterian Church in LaGrange, GA.

² The Rule of St. Benedict, chapter 7.

ourselves in God's place we want to rise above others, decide for ourselves what life is all about, and be our own boss in life. To acknowledge God is to get off the pedestal and devote ourselves to something more important than ourselves, namely God and his work in the world. There really is no necessity to be humble if there is no God. But, because there is a wonderful, powerful, caring God, whom we know, humility only makes sense.

The Second Step follows naturally. Because there is a God greater than us, we need to suspect our own wisdom, our own ideas, our own desires and plans. This is only logical. To believe in God is to say at the core of our being that there is something wiser for me than I could devise. The Christian life is like hiring an interior decorator. What feels right and logical and intuitive to us makes the room only so-so. We only get to special with the eye and experience of the decorator. The decorator helps us to take our room to the next level. In life sometimes we need to do something different from what comes naturally in order to move forward. The capacity to say, "I may not be right about that," is an important step to humility.

The Third Step is to recognize that God's will sometimes comes through the ordinary channels of our parents, teachers, leaders, more mature Christians, our boss, the law, the chorus of the voices of our

friends. We've got to listen and heed to be freed of the everlasting burden of always having to be right.

Benedict's Fourth Step is to be patient with hardship. As a general rule it is a wise exercise to ask ourselves what the general lot and condition of humanity is. It helps to recognize that all people in all places and times must endure some forms of difficulty. People work and put up with others. People suffer loss and anxiety. Having established the conditions under which most people live, ask yourself bluntly, "What makes me think that I qualify to avoid the common life of humankind which even Jesus accepted." What are the grounds that I will accept riches without labor, status without contribution, joy without virtue and so on. Question your sense of entitlement.

The Fifth Step asks us to give up secrecy and let hang out at least somewhere, who we really are. Ask yourself, "What am I hiding so to appear to be someone other than my real self?" Be careful, unregulated self-disclosure is a form of immodesty and makes us too vulnerable to exploitation. Secretiveness, on the other hand, invariably conceals something immoral or ugly about our characters. Like the Wizard in the Wizard of Oz, we present to the world a grand personage while we're really little people hiding behind the curtain of dishonesty. Seeming to be what we aren't is to claim attention and applause on the cheap.

Benedict's Sixth Step asks us to be content with the ordinary and worst of everything. This touches a real nerve in America where affluence and debt driven prosperity make possible breathtaking acquisition and designer lives. The capacity to ask probing questions helps. Is it appropriate that we live like royalty—even if we can afford to do so? Is our interest in more, bigger, more prestigious, due to need or out of a desire to stand out or keep up? What is the real cost of a plush lifestyle? Can I really afford to spend the time shopping, insuring, maintaining, using, and disposing of the best of everything? Is a regal style of life what God has called me to or was I created to answer a higher calling?

Now the Seventh Step is a bit difficult for me to see as particularly deep or compelling. I'll simply tell you what it is. Benedict asks that we admit with our tongue and be convinced in our heart that we are inferior to all and of less value than others. Talking the talk. Apparently committing to speech a humble attitude helps to make it real. I'll leave it to you to flesh that one out in your life.

The next four steps entail the role of our speech in prideful, self-promoting behavior. The way we talk clearly reveals the condition of our hearts. While there is more profundity in these sections of Benedict's Rule than we can unpack this morning, we can

summarize: Being loud, interrupting, manipulating, lying all are attempts to jockey for dominance. We need to regulate how we talk.

Secondly, talkative people are at risk of giving vent to haughtiness. We just can't gush words all day long and have all of that talk be consistently gentle, loving, and helpful. What is really on our minds or what is really important to us always finds a way to be expressed. And what better way to get out than to hitch a ride on the torrent of words that are already flowing out of our mouths. This problem is especially hazardous for those of us with quick senses of humor. Benedict actually touches upon this. Humorous cracks—when they really are funny—are clever turns of phrase, irony, or humorously surprising observations. It takes a little bit of creativity to be funny. And the guy who is cracking the jokes tends to be the center of attention—a hazard in the context of a sermon on humility—because he is calling up the laughter. Here's another problem. It's hard enough to be just funny. It is beyond the reach for most comedians to be both funny and also remain humble, tasteful, and respectful. Most comedians just aren't that good. So, to be the class clown is a high risk occupation. To be the clown in church takes on the additional risk of being struck down by lightning. Bottom line: less talk, fewer jokes.

Benedict's Twelfth Step of humility is to manifest humility in the body language or our lives, a phrase Benedict, of course, didn't

use, but is useful to us. Ask yourself, "What's the message in this visual?" Putting a t-shirt on a toddler that reads "Too Cool 4 You," almost certainly is a flawed Christian parenting strategy. What's the message? Am I on display in any way? Does my car, décor, bumper sticker, brand label, dress (or lack of dress), tattoo, or general bearing call attention to itself for the purpose of distancing myself from the ordinary?

We listen to Benedict and realize how contrary the direction of our culture has become to classic Christian humility. But how refreshing! We look at these steps and realize that this is how Jesus walked! This is who he is. He, who even in heaven, chose the road down. Even in the world, Jesus climbed no pedestal, grabbed no status, claimed no entitlement, was not too cool for anyone. It was in humility and through humility that the mission of God to the world went forward. Jesus taught that service makes you great, that washing feet is the norm, that the sinner who beat his breast was more justified than the religious big shot, that the lost sheep is who God is interested in and that they bust out the Champaign in heaven when sinners give up on themselves. Don't let the whisper of our culture of narcissism and consumption fool you. Humility isn't so much about thinking poorly of ourselves or acting in a lowly fashion. It is following Jesus. It is to adopt his basic

orientation on life. Because "all who exalt themselves will still be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted."