

Humility and Holiness¹

We've been talking about humility in the last couple of sermons. We've mostly focused on the dramatic upswing in self-exaltation in our generation. More and more we see attention-grabbing behavior, the expectation that we are entitled to lives of the rich and famous, and an approach to personal relationships that has a way of becoming "all about" one of the partners.

This self-preoccupation in our times has become so pronounced that a whole array of scientific measurements are now giving indisputable evidence that there is a true shift underway in attitudes. There is, to cite a representative example, a study that measures college students' narcissistic personality traits that has been used since 1979. College students in the 2000s were significantly more self-absorbed than the students of the 1970s, '80s, and '90s.

Humility—having a modest or painfully realistic view of ourselves—is certainly out of phase with the drift of our times. So what we're talking about is counter-cultural. That means that to advocate humility in say, this sermon, is going to sound a little extreme or just nuts. It would be more comfortable and

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would fit more with our society if we were saying "You're special, you deserve the best."

I've long been fascinated with vices and virtues and character development. But I must admit that I've never given much thought to humility. I've ordered several books on the subject. The big surprise to me about this subject is that humility is a big deal. That's an ironic statement, but useful. The more I've read and wrestled, the more I'm convinced that a humble attitude, the ability to be brutally realistic about ourselves and our importance, is the soil in which all the other virtues are rooted.

The original sin in the Garden of Eden was Adam and Eve wanting to be God, their own little gods. And from that original sin, so our faith teaches us, all the misery, brokenness, and evil in the world was given birth. Later, the Bible teaches us, God the Son took the journey of humility to save the world. Jesus lived in heaven with God the Father. He enjoyed all the trappings of divinity—power, security, wealth—but he chose humility; he chose to come down to the world. Even in the world, Jesus didn't choose the lifestyle of the rich and famous. Jesus was a servant. He died a shameful death with bad people. Through his journey of humility came the rescue and

redemption of the world. From the humility of Jesus an incalculable flow of goodness has come and continues to come.

How do you and I participate in the journey of humility, especially in our time when so many others in our generation are clawing their way onto pedestals? We get a glimpse of the answer to that question in our lesson today.

The story has always been for me a sobering one. The young ruler has really done a great job in life. He comes to Jesus after a lifetime of achievement obeying the Law of Moses. What is bracing is that Jesus insists that as a condition of discipleship, that the man sells his possessions and gives away the proceeds and pulls up stakes and follows Jesus around. Well, the man just can't do it. He walks away defeated. Jesus is sad too.

What fascinates me is that the disciples and onlookers are also a little stunned. They ask, "Who can be saved?" That's my question. I'm not sure I could do what Jesus asked the ruler to do. This is a humbling moment. I may not possess what it takes. The onlookers think the same thing. "We don't have what it takes."

Jesus' remark in response is amazing. "What is impossible for us is possible for God." In other words, just when we realize that we can't do what is required; just when we realize

we are not devoted enough, strong enough, good enough, self-disciplined enough, that is the moment when God can do it for us.

The pastor who baptized me put me onto this principle when I was seventeen. "Dr. Ted," I asked, "There are lots of people who I just can't love. I can hardly stand some of them." He said, "When that happens, pray, 'God, love this person through me,' and see what happens."

St. Anthony, one of the earliest desert fathers—who were the earliest monks who lived as hermits in the Egyptian desert, said this: "Without temptation no person can be saved." What he meant by that is that as you and I struggle with temptation we realize just how weak we are. Just try to give up a bad habit, deep from calling attention to yourself, feel envious, or lose your temper. The truth is that it may be impossible to become pure and holy people by dint of our will power. Sometimes when we try hard, some new sin pops out. If we dare look at ourselves and our track record it dawns on us that we're never going to will ourselves to pure hearts and sterling characters. It's at this point that Jesus' words are wonderfully relieving what is impossible for a person is possible with God. Somehow in our utter humility and failure before God, we abandon ourselves and God fills our place.

Alcoholics Anonymous have what I'm talking about as their first steps. "We admitted we were powerless over alcohol—that our lives had become unmanageable. And we came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity. And we made a decision to turn our lives over to the care of God." What would be wrong with using that principle with sin instead of alcohol? We admitted we were powerless over sin—that our lives had become unmanageable.

I like the old saying. "We're saints as a last resort." It's only when you and I courageously look at the record of our lives—a humble and humbling practice—that we come to realize that only with God in control of our decisions and attitude do we stand a chance of actually living in a way that pleases God. Or as the Apostle Paul puts it, we walk by the Spirit.

Having said all of this suddenly I recall another little detail in our lesson. The young ruler approaches Jesus respectfully enough, "Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus replies: "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone."

Of course! Jesus himself lived by the very principle we're talking about. As a human, Jesus was powerless on his own to live the life the Father desired from him. So even Jesus needed

to invite God into his heart to guide and inspire and love through him.

We're talking about the power of humility to give rise to every good act and attitude. Don't be fooled by the self-absorbed spirit of our generation. The path of entitlement and me-first always leads to a fall. But the journey with Jesus down, recognizing accurately that we're not all that exceptional, that we have an embarrassing record of wickedness and foolishness, and that we are probably not the big deals we'd like to think we are. When we take that path we open ourselves to God's movement in our lives and all the potential that that entails.