

October 4, 2020

*"Humility"*

John Wesley United Methodist Church

Various verses about humility

Rev. Rebecca Mincieli, 508-548-3050

Now with President Trump in the hospital with coronavirus, I feel a little bad talking about the candidates. But there was a presidential debate this week that I'm sure you know got totally out of control. I heard it called a train wreck, a dumpster fire, and a "expletive deleted"... show. But as I was listening to what was being said, and after filtering out all the noise, I heard a lot of, "I did this," and "No, I did that," and "I," "I," "I." So, after thinking about it, "I" thought it might be a good idea to preach today on the virtue of humility. Because power and pride and arrogance were evident that night, not only on the stage, but then later, with all the news commentators espousing their "expert" opinions and assessments. Yes, pride and arrogance are so conspicuous in today's world among politicians, the rich, the successful, the famous, celebrities of all sorts, that it's now almost celebrated. Because just look at how we listen to and even revere these people. And the sad fact is, that pride and arrogance are also alive and well in ordinary people, including you and me. Yet few of us realize how dangerous it is to our character and souls and more so, how destructive it can be to our relationship with one another and with God.

So let's look at humility. First, I think we need to look at what might be considered the opposite of humility – pride. Now let me say that pride, in its purest form, can be, can be an attractive quality. After all, the desire for excellence, the aspiration to do your best, a sense of achievement, are all beneficial effects of a healthy pride. But the problem is that we often let our pride run rampant, and when that happens, pride's very close friends, egotism and vanity tend to takeover. In a sense, pride becomes the proverbial "monkey on your back." You've probably all heard that expression; having a monkey on your back. It means carrying an annoying, vexing problem. It's a monkey that just won't let go. It's always present, and it has to be cared for and fed. So it is with our pride, our ego – it has to be fed. We constantly have to make ourselves feel good, and so our pride becomes an unhealthy belief in our own importance. We have to convince ourselves that we're better than others, and that we deserve to have more than those around us. And suddenly that great commandment Jesus counseled us to follow, to "love your neighbor as you love yourself," easily turns into "love only yourself." So you can easily understand how pride can affect our relationship with others.

And pride affects our relationship with God as well. Because when we have a prideful attitude, we take too much credit for the things we have, for our achievements, and we come to look at our lives as products of our own doing rather than a gift from Almighty God. And when we do this, we are moving dangerously close to that sin of idolatry. Idolatry, where the danger is that we make ourselves into little gods. That's why we need to constantly remind ourselves of two fundamentals of our faith: 1) there is only one God, and 2) you're not him. As theologian, Andrew Murray said, "In God, you come up against something which is, in every respect, immeasurably superior to yourself. Unless you know that, you do not know God at all. A proud man is always looking down on things and people, and of course, as long as you are looking down, you cannot see something that is above you." That's why St. Paul challenges us with the question: "What makes you different from anyone else? What do you have that you did not receive freely from God?" Think about that phrase. What do you have that was not given to you but through the goodness and grace of God. (Pause.)

So now let's look at humility. You know sometime we think humility is a lack of self-esteem. Or humility is sitting quietly, afraid to contribute because you think others are better than you. Or humility is letting others take advantage of you. But that's not true. No, the biblical definition of humility is much different. In fact, The Holman Bible dictionary defines humility as, "A personal quality in which an individual shows respect (and love) for other persons, and a dependence on God." Let me repeat that, humility is defined as "a personal quality in which an individual shows respect and love for other persons, and a dependence on God."

First, respect and love for other persons. Now this should go without saying, but you can see the disastrous results of not showing others respect and love. Friendships and marriages become dissolved by angry words and long standing resentments. Prejudices separate race from race and religion from religion. Reputations are destroyed by malicious gossip. Greed puts enmity between rich and poor. Wars are fought over prideful and arrogant assertions. But having an attitude of humility helps us see and interact differently with others. Whereas pride makes us see ourselves as more important or better than others, humility makes us see ourselves the way we really are – with all our own faults, our own frailties, our own issues. And when we really look inward like that, it makes it so much easier to look outward with respect and love for others. Yes, humility is what is needed if we are to live in peace and harmony with all people. Humility allows us to see the dignity and worth of all of God's people. Humility draws us to one another, not apart from one another.

Now the second part – humility is dependence on God. In a nutshell, it means that the humble person knows that the source of all he or she has – health, wealth, skills, family, friends, is all from God, and God alone. Humility says, “I need God and I trust God in all matters of my life.” Now who is the best example of that kind of dependence – Jesus Christ. Someone once called Jesus a “good teacher.” And Jesus' response was, “Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone.” Because look how Jesus defers to God on all matters. “My teachings are not my own, but him who sent me.” “I do nothing on my own initiative, but I speak these things as the Father taught me.” “The words I say to you I do not speak on my own authority, but the Father dwelling in me does his works.” “I go to the Father, for the Father is greater than I.” Jesus' whole life was one in which he continually deferred to the will of God, obeying God, submitting to God. And to live the Christian life, this is the example we must follow. Too often our prideful nature makes us think we can depend on our own limited wisdom and strength. And then when things don't work out as planned, problems, stress, and anxiety creep into our lives. But if we follow Jesus' example, we will first ask the question, “What does God want me to do, how does God want me to handle this?” And when we look to Almighty God for answers to these questions, we find that we are given a sense of clarity, of peace, of purpose and direction that we could never find on our own.

But let's go back to Jesus. Do you know that there is only one place in the entire Bible where Jesus Christ describes his own character. Not who he is, or what he came to do, but his character. And this is what he says, “...I am gentle and humble in heart.” “I am gentle and humble in heart.” Now would anyone mistake Jesus as weak or fearful or afraid? Of course not. Rather he is commanding and mighty and powerful... because he was beautifully humble in heart.

And how appropriate that today we celebrate Holy Communion. Because think for a moment of what we are really doing here. From the world's point of view, it may seem strange that we take this humble little wafer and cup of juice and hold it up in such high regard. But what we are actually doing is opening up our hands and hearts, coming like the little children he calls us to be, putting aside all our pride and prejudices, casting off our vanities, remembering that what we need most in this world is God's unconditional love and grace given freely to us. If we come like this, we will know the true meaning of humility. Amen.

## Prayer

Lord, we seek to come to your table today with gentle and humble hearts. We do know our place before you – you are immeasurably superior. And yet you love us as your children, with unconditional love and compassion and grace. And we are humbled and we are grateful. And, Lord, we ask for an attitude of humility when we think of others. Forgive us when we look down on others, when we judge, when we feed our own ego by thinking we are somehow better, more put together. Give us gentle and humble hearts, so that we treat each other – all others with love and respect.

And Lord, in love and respect, we lift up President Trump, Melania, and indeed all who are sick, who have lost loved ones, and for all whom this virus has caused not only health issues, but economic issues, mental health issues, loneliness, addiction, and more. We are a world in need, and so Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer. Amen.