

The Mystery of Humility

Luke 18:9-14

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The image that Luke paints of the two men in worship is certainly dramatic, almost comical in a way. It lends itself to a one act play. It is a study in contrast. Humility is the theme. And, it is wonderfully appropriate for Stewardship Sunday!

I was thinking of how the two fellows in the story could really be understood as one person; the first voice speaking from that place of immature boasting and unexamined faith, the voice of the young Mohammad Ali. "I am the greatest!" The second voice speaks from the place of wisdom, from the place of suffering and life experience and grace and struggle, the voice of the more seasoned Mohammed Ali. "I am a human being." The text invites us into the mystery of humility.

Humility often gets a bad rap in our culture. It is associated with being a wimp, with letting others walk all over you, with being a doormat. But this is far from the true meaning of the word.

Humility implies a willingness to see things from the other's perspective. In my view, that requires courage. **Humility implies** there might just be a power in the universe greater than my own power. In my view, that requires bravery. **Humility implies** a desire to learn from the wisdom of the neighbor, that there is always something more to learn. In my view, that requires super human strength. **Humility implies** a walking softly upon the earth, respectful of the fullness of creation. In my view, this requires conviction. To be a humble human being is to be a force in the world like none other. I regret that our culture has lost sight of humility's true meaning. I'd like to believe our church can reclaim that word.

So, in the dramatic parable for today, Luke takes us into the house of worship. At that time it was known as the temple. In these days, we call it the church.

The invitation is to come into the presence of God just as we are: as flawed as we are, as wounded as we are, as needy as we are. The invitation is to be uncommonly authentic in the presence of our God. There is no pulling the wool over this God's eyes. There is only the assurance of grace, the assurance that nothing could ever separate us from God's love, the bewildering truth that God accepts us just as we are.

Luke offers us two caricatures. One comes before God pretending to be a saint, perfect in every way, a picture of an unblemished rose. He reminds us of that country and western song by Mac Davis:

“O Lord it's hard to be humble, when you're perfect in every way; I can't wait to look in the mirror, I get better looking each day.”

The other comes before God with neither mask nor shield nor any hint of pretending, a picture of his humble self. He reminds us of the old Gospel hymn by Charlotte Elliott published in the Invalid's Hymnbook:

“Just as I am, without one plea but that your blood was shed for me, And that you called inviting me, O Lamb of God, I come, I come.”

To the one God says, “Get real.” To the other, God says, “Come into the blessed kingdom.”

Recently, I was looking through some college catalogues to see what is being taught these days in the general curriculum. None of the colleges is offering the class, Humility 101.

So I got to thinking: if humility is a core value of the Christian walk, where does one learn to be humble? This core value is not promoted on the sports channels. It is hardly ever stressed by the film industry. Magazine ads don't feature it.

It falls, then, to the faith communities to offer role models to the next generations. This is one way in which the church is counter-cultural. We embrace the notion of being humble servants in the world. We embrace the notion of gaining the other's perspective, of learning from the other, of walking a mile in the other's moccasins, and of walking softly upon the earth.

When I walk the church school corridors, I see that our church school teachers are humble adults. When I sit at the supper tables on Wednesday evenings, I see that our Wednesday School teachers are humble adults. When I pop into the building on Sunday afternoons, I see that our middle school youth advisors are humble adults. I see all this and I am filled with hope for the future of the church. If the children and youth don't remember the content of the lessons, they will surely have been exposed to this great mystery, the mystery of humility.

At the beginning of this sermon, I suggested this story from Luke is a good text for Stewardship Sunday. For me, stewardship has to do with nurturing and sustaining the spiritual gifts that have been entrusted to us, nurturing and sustaining the core values of our faith. I suppose, in some way, all of the Bible stories have shaped my faith and my outlook on the world, but if I had to choose one, it would be John's account of the Last Supper. Jesus and the twelve are seated at a table in an upper room. They are waiting for the servant to come to wash their feet.

The basin of water and the towel are there, but the servant has been mysteriously delayed. No one moves.

Then, in what I picture as a dramatic movement, Jesus arises from his seat, moves to the wash stand, returns with the basin and the towel, and proceeds to wash all twenty four feet, including the feet of Judas who was to betray him. Though the disciples protest, Jesus insists on modeling for them the role of the servant leader. When the last toes have been dried, he says to them, "I have set you an example that you should do as I have done." These words have been burned into my soul. Thankfully, they have been burned into the souls of many in this church.

In a few moments, I will place our pledge card for 2014 into the offering basket. On the surface, it's only money. But in a deeper sense we see our pledge to South Church as a commitment to keep on modeling for the younger generations what it means to embrace humility, what it means to offer servant leadership, what it means to feel the pain of the world and to respond in love. So, I remain in the greatest of hope. Amen!