

“The Call to Humility”

Matthew 23:1-12

Richard C. Allen

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The lectionary for today takes us to one of the most profound teachings on the meaning of discipleship. It comes in the form of a paradox. Jesus is rather irked by the self-aggrandizement of many in leadership roles. He watches them draw attention to themselves, elevate themselves; brag on themselves. So, he takes the disciples to a place apart, sits them down, and says, “Look, all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted.” This is a great paradox. On the surface, it doesn’t make any sense. But at a deeper level, it reveals a truth that is key to unlocking the mystery of abundant life.

On another occasion, when pressed with the question of why he had come into the world, Jesus had replied, “So that you may have life and have it with abundance.” When Jesus saw the religious leaders puffing themselves up, he saw that their abundance was superficial and short-lived, and lacking meaning. What Jesus understood, and would have us understand, is that abundance of life is discovered in the pursuit of humility, in giving God the glory instead of claiming it for ourselves. Jesus wanted his disciples to follow a different path, a counter-cultural path. Those who have chosen this other path, the path of humility, have discovered the abundance Jesus came to reveal.

Shortly, we will celebrate the Sacrament of Communion. This simple meal of bread and cup is intended to be a humble meal. It is not a gala event with whistles and bells, not a seven course feast with appetizers and ordourves, but a simple remembrance of one who lived simply so that others could simply live. Our Communion meal points to the kind of lifestyle Jesus had in mind for his disciples. The bread and the cup are both symbols of humility.

As I worked on this sermon, I became fixated on a gift from my mother that sits on my desk. It is a music box in the shape of a grand piano. I wound it up and began to listen to the simple melody we know as Beethoven's Ode to Joy from his Ninth Symphony. The words of that hymn came to me: "Joyful, joyful we adore thee, God of glory, God of love..." I wound it up a second time and listened again. In my heart, the music felt like an embodiment of humility. I played it a third time. I wondered if all the radio stations in the world would play this tune each day, what a difference it would make; the whole world draped in the music of humility.

Then of course, I thought of the familiar Shaker tune, "Simple Gifts." 'Tis the gift to be simple; 'tis the gift to be free. 'Tis the gift to come down where we ought to be, and when we find ourselves in the place just right, 'twill be in the valley of love and delight.'

Jesus held up a unique vision for his disciples to embrace and to live into. Because of this unique vision of a humble heart, many turned away from him, thinking him to be an oddball. Yet, others were drawn to this truth. Many still are.

I think of Newt and Myrtle Brummett. They lived on a farm just east of Dupree, South Dakota, half-way to Lantry. They worked the land, raised a family, came to church on Sunday mornings. Sat in the third pew on the south side of the church.

When they reached that ripe old age when it was time to give up the farm and move into town, they sold their land for an amount far below the going price per acre. Some folks thought the Brummetts had lost their mind. When pressed for the reason for selling the farm at such a low price, they replied, "We wanted another family to grow up on that land, to enjoy the harvest God provides, and we knew a young couple wouldn't be able to afford the rising price of land." After that, no one asked them that question again. We were all stunned by their humility. They preferred to place the happiness of a young family ahead of their own security for old age.

"Those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."

Today, I am thanking God for all those who have chosen this more excellent way, thereby shaping my own soul, and the souls of so many others. It's because of these role models that we find ourselves living in the greatest of hope. Amen.