

Oh, Where to Sit?

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Humility is something that we sometimes have a bit of a problem achieving. I know I struggle with it. As a matter of fact, Rom asked me the other day, “What’s this week’s sermon going to be on?” I told him it’s about humility. His next question was, “Are you humble?” To which I responded with something along the lines of, “Well... er... um... I try to be humble.”

It is difficult for many folks to be humble. I know, for me personally, it’s something I’m constantly working on. But sometimes I get these really odd ideas in my head. For example, “Oh, they love that I give sermons with no notes.” Or, “Oh, they really like me here.” Or, “Oh, I can do not wrong”... Nope, back it up. Back it up.

So, humility is something that we struggle with. It’s something that pastors struggle with. It’s something that doctors struggle with, or business persons or professional athletes. It’s something that we all struggle with. No matter who we are, there’s a point, no matter how small, where we get it in our head, “Oh, we’re God’s gift to everyone.”

...And then God takes us down a few pegs. Hopefully, we take that and put ourselves back in the humble spot where we should be.

This passage in Luke, where Jesus is teaching about being humble, reminds me of a couple stories I’ve heard. The first is of a bishop who had come in and was celebrating a wonderful ministry of feeding the hungry at one of the church’s in his episcopal area. Some of the people there were beneficiaries of the program, including a large number of children. The bishop got up and blessed the meal and sat back down. But the host church asked the bishop to get his plate first. In humility, the bishop responded, “No, let the people and the children eat first. This is a celebration for them who we feed with this ministry. I’ll wait.” But the host church insisted the bishop eat first because he held higher distinction. So, out of a lack of regard for humility, in a celebration for those who struggle with hunger, the hungry had to watch a man who was not experiencing hunger eat first.

In this moment, the question is how do we show humility when those around us aren’t accepting our humility? How can we be humble when we are lifted up despite our protest? How can we be humble when we are told there is no need to be humble, telling us we are to important? It’s something to think about.

The second story this reminds me of comes from Rev. Dr. Steve Lewis, pastor of Gresham United Methodist Church. He was sharing a story with the congregation about when he was a young preacher visiting a church to fill in as pulpit supply for the pastor. This was a church he’d never been to. So, no one knew who he was.

He arrived about a half hour before service and sat in a pew in the sanctuary waiting for service to begin and centering himself. A bit of time goes by and there’s a tap on his shoulder. It’s an older

gentleman and his wife. “Excuse me son. You’re in our pew.” Steve responded graciously to that. He understood that people like to sit where they like to sit. We get use to being in a certain spot each week. I can just about guarantee most of you are in the same spot this week as you were last week and you will be next week. Steve got up and found another pew to sit.

Well, another several minutes go by and there’s another tap on Steve’s shoulder. “Son, you’re sitting in our pew. We’ve been sitting her for 15 years.” Again, Steve responds graciously, gets up, and looks for another place to sit. He decides to go to the very front and sit in the first pew this time. His thought process was, “No self-respecting United Methodist Church member ever sits in the front pew.”

Normally, that reasoning would’ve worked. I rarely ever see folks sitting in the front pew at a church. I think most people feel comfortable with that barrier of the first pew in front of them. But not this time. Another several minutes pass and there’s a third tap on Steve’s shoulder. “You’re sitting in our pew. We’ve been sitting here for 30 years.”

Three times Steve was asked to move by someone who felt they had a claim on that seat in that pew. Part of this goes to how we welcome folks into the house of God. Do we do it with humility? Or do we do it with an attitude of, ‘you can come, but just don’t mess with what’s mine.’ Part of it goes to how we think of ourselves. Are we better than the next person because we’ve been here longer? Or are we humble enough to make room for the visitor in our pew?”

Well, all three couples that asked Steve to move were a little shocked, and mentally knocked down a few pegs, when he was introduced as the preacher that morning. I don’t think anyone of them really wanted to make eye contact with him after that. What can you do when you don’t show humble hospitality in welcoming the stranger, and the stranger turns out to be, to borrow from scripture, more distinguished than you? All you can really do is sit there with your foot in your mouth.

People saying, they have a particular claim on a pew started a long while back, and it brings up another question of humility. The first is a question of the Church’s humility. A long while back, the Church had this practice of selling “indulgences”. Someone, at some point, thought it would be a great idea to tell folks, if they paid the church, that money would go toward working off the unforgiven sins of a dearly departed loved one so they could get out of purgatory and into heaven faster. That takes a lot of self-exalted thinking to say we have the power and authority to get your loved one out of purgatory. You just need to pay us.

The second is the practice of renting out the pews. At one point the church literally rented out the pews. Where you got to sit was determined by how much you paid. The front pews were more expensive to rent than the back pews. So, if you were sitting toward the front, you generally had more wealth. Sitting in the front pew became a status symbol. If you sat in the back pews, you were either thrifty or very poor. You can see where this might lead to a division among church members based on your social class. And how those in front might start thinking of themselves as better than those people in the back.

To have the idea that your importance in the church depends on where you sit is, in a way, an echo of what's going on in the Gospel passage this morning. Jesus comes in to this Pharisee's home, invited to this dinner, a wedding banquet. Right before the passage we read, Jesus heals a man with dropsy (severe swelling of the lower legs and ankles). He even challenged the Pharisees before he performed the healing, asking them if it was lawful to heal on the Sabbath. None of them answered him. Jesus healed the man, then asked the Pharisees, "If one of you has a child or an ox that falls into a well on the Sabbath day, will you not immediately pull it out?"

Again, the Pharisees did not answer Jesus. Of course, what were they going to say? If their ox fell in the well, an animal they needed for work in the fields, would they say, "He'll be fine till the Sabbath is over." No, they'd work to get that animal out of the well because the animal is essential for their livelihood. If their child fell in the well, would they say, "Sorry kid, you're going to have to wait till sundown to be rescued." No, they're going to start working at getting the child out of the well as quickly as possible because life has value.

There's an importance and a humility even the law has to follow. Law should always be humbled before the value of life. Even on the Sabbath, God shows humility by resting the law in cases of emergency, and in cases where an act of love is more distinguished than an act of blind obedience.

After this exchange, we come to the passage from this morning, where Jesus was watching the crowd. He was looking to see who was sitting where. He watched as people came in and were taking the more prominent seats. When Jesus saw this, he turned to the guests and began to teach them a lesson in humility. He told them, when they're invited to a wedding banquet, not to sit in the important seats. What if someone comes in who's more distinguished than them? Then their host will have to come and tell them to move, and they will be embarrassed and humiliated because they will have to move to the only seats left; the lowest seats.

Instead, Jesus told them to go and sit in the low seats. That way, when their host comes and sees them sitting in the low seat, he will ask them why they are sitting there. Then their host will invite them to sit in a higher seat and they will be honored.

How do we put that into practice? How do we put humility into practice? I think the answer to this question comes from how we respond to God.

One of the lectionary scriptures for today, that wasn't read, comes from Jeremiah, chapter two. In the passage, Jeremiah is asking Israel what God has done that they would turn away from God? What did God do that they would tear down God's altars and start worshiping Baal? What has God done and how has God abandoned them, that they would not remember how God loved them and brought them out of Egypt to the land they now live in? Jeremiah asks if any nation had ever done such a thing; trade their glorious God for worthless idols?

Jeremiah goes on to say God has two charges against Israel. The Lord declares, "My people have committed two sins: They have forsaken me, the spring of living water, and have dug their own cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water" (Jeremiah 2:13).

Israel thought it knew best. They thought they knew better than God. They didn't think they needed the law that God had given. They forsook the law, that in its summation, is all about love, maintaining a relationship with the holy, and redemption. They lost the humility of a people rescued by God and set free from bondage. They raised themselves to a place where they didn't have to hold themselves accountable to God. They didn't realize in doing so, what they were building for themselves was causing the distinction God had given them, that hope and new life that comes from having a relationship God, to seep away.

Now the scripture we read from Hebrews, goes the other way. Hebrews actually gives us examples of what it is to be humble. Rather than turning away from God, being humble is staying focused on God. Rather than thinking you can do it yourself, the passage from Hebrews calls us to humbly trust in God and trust in neighbor.

Let's go through some of these practices God has given us. "Keep on loving one another... Don't forget to show hospitality to strangers... Continue to remember those in prison... and those who are mistreated... Marriage should be honored... Say with confidence, "The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid"... Remember your leaders... imitate their faith..." (Heb. 13:1-7).

Loving one another is an act of humility because it causes us to put ourselves aside and raise the other person up. It places the needs of neighbor above needs of self. Jesus even taught there are two commandments that sum up all the law and the commandments. They are to *love the Lord your God with all you heart, soul, strength, and mind. And the second is like it, to love your neighbor as yourself.* Put God and neighbor first, and you will live humbly.

Don't forget to be hospitable to strangers and don't forget those who are in prison or who are mistreated. These, too, call for humility because the epistle compels us to not just remember, but also empathize. It compels us to put ourselves in the place of the stranger and the prisoner and the one who suffers. We can't do that without being humble, because it requires us to step out of ourselves and be vulnerable.

The movie "Patch Adams" (1998), starring Robin Williams, tells the story of a medical student who lived this kind of humility. He was a man, traumatized by the suicide of his father at a young age, who, by making a change in his attitude toward life, set out to become a doctor and truly help the sick. In an era where the doctor was highly exalted and the sick patient was more a puzzle to be solved than a human being, Patch brought a new vision of what the practice of medicine could look like. Rather than treat just the virus, bacteria, infection, or cancer in the body, Patch wanted to treat the whole patient; the whole human being. He wanted medicine and healing to become about recognizing people for the unique value they had and be in relationship with them. In a review by the medical board Patch had these words to share. "You treat a disease, you win, you lose. You treat a person, I guarantee you, you win, no matter what the outcome."

Patch's vision made some of the other students, teachers, and established professionals uneasy. How could you unbiasedly treat a disease if you allowed yourself to experience empathy for the patient? Dean Walcott, the head of the medical school, was one such established professional who adamantly opposed Patch's approach. And when Patch challenges the Dean, asking him, "Why

am I such a threat to you?" the Dean responds by saying, "Because what you want is for us to get down there on the same level as our patients... to destroy objectivity..."

By making himself vulnerable, Patch got in there, built relationship, and changed so many patients' lives. Even those who were dying, with no hope of recovery, were experiencing a better quality of life. Why? Because Patch refused to treat them as less than human, and refused to elevate himself beyond who God created him to be. Patch got down there on the same level as his patients, got to know them, empathize with them, understand their struggle and all that comes with it. He charged passed the point of seeing the sick patient simply as a body with an infection or a dysfunction.

Well, guess what. The world is full of people who have dysfunctions in their souls and trouble in their hearts. Humility, vulnerability, not assuming we are better than we are, not being arrogant in Christ is how we reach them.

The thing about an arrogant heart... an arrogant heart closes the door to God. Think of some of the lessons we've talked about from the Gospel. Think of how the religious leaders dealt with some of the issues of the people of Israel in Jesus' day. Think how the religious leaders reacted to the people. Then think about how Jesus reacted.

Jesus sits and eats with sinners. The religious leaders see this and challenge him as to why he's eating with those people. Doesn't he know they're sinners? Doesn't he know he's defiled himself just by associating with them? Jesus responds, "It is not the healthy that need a doctor, but the sick."

Jesus heals on the Sabbath. The Pharisees respond by chastising the crowds, telling them there are six days on which to come and be healed. Come be healed on those days, but not on the Sabbath. Jesus says, God loves us every day. God wants us to find peace and rest for our souls in God's love every day.

The Pharisees, on seeing a woman bleeding for twelve years, isolated as one unclean because of her constant issue of blood, would have kept her isolated. Jesus, when this woman stepped out in boldness, and in faith touched the hem of his robe, said to her, "Daughter your faith has made you well."

Humility allows us to work with God. Humility and vulnerability open us up. If we're not humble, we close the door to what God can do through us. If we are not humble, we are in God's way more than we are walking with God. It's not easy to be humble. But once we've allowed ourselves to be humble, so many possibilities can open up before us. Because the blinders of self-importance have been removed.

As I close today, I just wanna share a few examples of humble leadership in the world. One example of humble leadership is Mahatma Gandhi, who, through non-violent resistance, led his people in India to independence from British rule. His example inspired a number of other non-violent civil rights movements around the world. Mother Theresa was a very humble woman who had a ministry that helped thousands. Children, hungry, and the poor were all helped because of her humble trust in God even as she wrestled with questions of faith. Justin Trudeau, the Prime

Minister of Canada, when he was welcoming Syrian refugees into Canada, was there to meet them in person and even give them warm coats to help guard against the cold Canadian winters. Joyce Banda, the first woman President of Malawi, saw the financial crisis her country was in, and rather than try to come up with some financial scheme, or raise the taxes to oppressive levels, she let go of the governmental jet and sixty governmental Mercedes.

How many leaders have we had that would humble themselves in these ways? These are the basics we need to get back to. It's going back to human decency, returning to basic simplicity, valuing human life over material possessions, that keeps us humble.

Humble thyself in the sight of the Lord. Because it's a humble heart through which we serve. It's the humble heart that hears God's voice the clearest. It's the humble heart that is ready and able and open.

Let us go forward with humble hearts. Let God work through us and in us, that this community, through our vulnerability may be served. In Jesus name, Amen.