

Sermon: "A Call for Humility"

Scripture Lessons: Philippians 2:4-11, John 12:12-16

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Each year Philippians 2 is among the lectionary readings for Palm Sunday because it sheds light on the meaning of the events that unfold during Holy Week. Jesus' humble entrance into Jerusalem on the donkey highlights the humility of this One who was God and who willingly emptied himself of the rights and privileges that were his in order to fully embrace and serve humanity. Christ knew who he was and was faithful to who he was even when it meant suffering and death. This is the word of God.

If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, Let the same mind be in you that was^[a] in Christ Jesus,⁶ who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited,⁷ but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form,⁸ he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.⁹ Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name,¹⁰ so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth,¹¹ and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. Amen.

Today we remember Christ's entrance into Jerusalem, which marks the beginning of Holy Week. In John's account, chapter 12, verses 12-16, he quotes the words of the Prophet Zechariah. Beyond the description of the palm branches and the hosannas, John emphasizes the gentleness and humility of Christ, who in contrast to the stallion, chose a donkey for his majestic entrance on his journey to the cross. Hear what the Spirit is saying to each of us.

¹² The next day the great crowd that had come to the festival heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem. ¹³ So they took branches of palm trees and went out to meet him, shouting, "Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord—the King of Israel!"¹⁴ Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it; as it is written:¹⁵ "Do not be afraid, daughter of Zion. Look, your king is coming, sitting on a donkey's colt!"¹⁶ His disciples did not understand these things at first; but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that these things had been written of him and had been done to him. Amen.

The sermon title: "A Call for Humility"

The Text: Have this mind among you which was in Christ Jesus. Philippians 2:5

Let us pray: Holy and Loving God, as we reflect on Paul's call for humility, may the words of my mouth and the meditations and thoughts of each of our hearts and minds be acceptable in your sight, our Strength and Redeemer. Amen.

In Greek mythology Narcissus is a handsome young man who rejected the desperate and repeated advances of the beautiful nymph Echo. He was proud, in that he disdained those who loved him. Nemesis, the goddess who enacted retribution on the arrogant noticed this behavior and attracted Narcissus to a pool, where he saw his own reflection in the water and fell in love with it, not realizing it was merely an image. Narcissus "lay gazing enraptured into the pool, hour after hour," unable to fulfill his love. Losing his desire to live, he finally is changed into a flower that bears his name, according to Greek mythology.

The concept of excessive absorption with oneself has been recognized throughout history. In ancient Greece the concept was understood as hubris. In the early twentieth century it was identified as a personality disorder later named for Narcissus. Persons with (NPD) Narcissistic Personality Disorder are characterized by their persistent grandiosity, excessive need for admiration, and a personal disdain and lack of empathy for other people. According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, they usually display the behaviors of arrogance, a sense of superiority, and actively seek to establish abusive power and control over others. Rather than having self-confidence (a strong sense of oneself) people with narcissistic personality disorder exhibit a fragile ego, an inability to tolerate criticism, and a tendency to belittle others in order to validate their own superiority. The cause of narcissistic personality disorder is unknown. Therapy is often difficult as people with the disorder frequently do not consider themselves to have a problem. About one percent of people are believed to be affected at some point in their life with NPD and it appears to occur more often in males than females.

Although Narcissistic Personality Disorder occurs within individuals, some psychologists and sociologists describe our contemporary society as a narcissistic culture. According to family therapist Dr. Mary Pipher, we have replaced the certainty, uniformity, and smugness of the 1950's with an uncertain, empty, and fragile identity hidden behind an over-confident, self-aggrandizing image with which we are infatuated and through which we project, "It's all about me!"

We begin a reflection on humility with a gaze upon narcissism because it sheds light on our culture's misunderstanding of humility which too often equates meekness with being weak. The humility to which Christ calls us differs radically from both self-deprecation and false modesty. Either, putting oneself down or playing a charade that one is really not as gifted as others, mocks the intent of Paul's call for humility. Christians are not invited to think "ill" of themselves or to engage in some self-degrading practice which is disingenuous.

Some mistakenly interpret humility as a lack of self-confidence or timidity. In reality, the person who is humble has a strong sense of self in relation to others and to God. It is because of an intrinsic self-worth that a person is able to be humble, to be respectful of others, and to be obedient to God. The Latin word for *humility* is very close to the Latin word for *humanity* and means to be *grounded, created from the earth*. Humility affirms one's intrinsic self-worth as a child of God, formed from the earth by the Potter into a human being. Humility accepts the limitations that are a part of being human, and understands that when these limitations are respected, they have the ability to expand one's horizon.

Humility is the antithesis of *hubris*, that excessive, arrogant pride which often leads to a person's demise. Humility is about a quiet confidence. It's about being content to let others discover who we are without having to boast about ourselves. Humility is a lack of arrogance, not a lack of initiative in the pursuit of achievement...in the fulfillment of the vocation to which God calls us.

Forbes Magazine, in an article entitled "The Paradox of Humility" by Doug Guthrie, talks about the importance of humility in a leader. Great leaders are talented, possessing special skills that allow them to inspire organizations to great heights. But true leadership requires them to be both exceptional and humble. A humble leader is secure enough to recognize his or her weaknesses and to seek the input and talents of others. By being receptive to outside ideas and assistance, creative leaders open up new avenues, build team consolidation, and take risks.

One of my favorite songs, Pick Yourself Up, was first song by the famous dance couple Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers in the 1936 film *Swing Time*. Poignantly, critics have noted that Ginger Rogers, in her own humble way, could dance as well as Fred Astaire, only backwards and in high heels. The song affirms there is something refreshing about a person who is willing to risk mistakes and learn from the missteps in life.

Nothing's impossible, I have found
For when my chin is on the ground.
I pick myself up, Dust myself off
And start all over again.

Don't lose your confidence if you slip
Be grateful for a pleasant trip
And pick yourself up, Dust yourself off
And start all over again.

Work like a soul inspired
Until the battle of the day is won.
You may be sick and tired,
But you'll be a man, my son.

Don't you remember the famous men,
Who had to fall to rise again
They picked themselves up, dusted themselves off
And started all over again!

Thank God for men and women who are willing to fall in order to rise again, who have the strength to bend, to stretch, and to put others before themselves. Thank God for men and women who recognize they don't know it all, who don't always have to be right, and who are willing to work in collaboration within the body of Christ to grow and to serve one another.

As Paul encourages the Christians in Rome, "Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the unpretentious." (Rom. 12:16). And as he said to the Philippians, "Do nothing from rivalry or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. ⁴Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. (Phil. 2:3-4). As we refuse to be preoccupied only with ourselves and our own importance and as we seek to love and serve others, it will reorient us from self-absorption and "It's all about me!" to serving others as Jesus did for us. In the narcissistic culture of our contemporary society, this is a particularly powerful countercultural witness of Christ's presence and lordship in our lives.

My friends, our faith has extended a call for humility, a call to have the same mind as Christ, the One whom we honor today, who humbly entered Jerusalem riding on a donkey over 2000 years ago in order to be faithful to who he was and who God called him to be. The epitome of humility is that the Creator God, who formed us from the dust of the earth joined us in our humanity. He was crucified by the hubris of this world in order to save it. He had to fall to rise again. Because of this One, who is our God and our Savior, we too can walk with confidence down the roads we are called to journey. We can walk with humility and authenticity, embracing our humanity, respecting one another, and being true to who God calls us to be.

Have this mind among you which is in Christ Jesus. By the grace of God, may we do so.
Amen.