

True Humility

Rick Lorentz
Faith United Church of Christ
Richmond Heights, Ohio

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Jeremiah 2:4-13, Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16; Luke 14:1-14

Text: "For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted." – Luke 14:11

This morning's Gospel lesson from Luke has several subjects from which a sermon topic could be chosen. Humility (being humble) seemed like the most interesting choice because it is a sought after trait, but it can also bring forth a lot of controversy and discussion. I don't have a corner on the subject of humility and certainly don't want to present myself as an expert on it. I'm not. I merely spent some time doing some thinking and reading on the subject as I was getting ready for this morning's message.

So OK... What is Humility? I mean what is true or authentic humility? Sometimes it's easier to recognize the opposite – the arrogant person who always has to step on others to feed his own ego. All of us can recognize the arrogance when we see it – and most of us are disgusted by it when we see it.

But let's get back to the definition of humility... So here it is.

Author and preacher, Dr. Crawford Loritts says that true humility is a state of being where you are freed from preoccupation with yourself and thus free to, one, be present to God and, two, be present to others. Genuine humility is also tied to being a servant to others. You take on the identity of being a servant to others or being a servant leader.

Humility is the intentional recognition that you are nothing without God. It is the acknowledgement that life is not about you, and that the needs of others are more important than your own. Humility is seen as a critical component of a closer relationship with God.

To help you understand better what I am trying to say this morning, let me ask a few rhetorical questions...

Do you have to be passive to be humble? Does true humility require you to lack confidence? Does it mean that you should never acknowledge accomplishments or achievements? Does it mean that you should never allow your picture to be printed in an article? Does it mean you can't show pride?

I think you and I both know that the answer to these questions is "No," but here's my point: I believe pride and humility can coexist, but there is a delicate balance. That balance is maintained by not focusing on your actions and choices, but focusing on your motives and attitudes. Let me say that again... Pride and humility have, for the most part, very little to do with your actions and choices, but they have everything to do with your motives and attitudes. It is what you believe about yourself that determines whether you are proud and humble.

We all remember Mother Teresa. She lived a long, but very simple life helping multitudes of people in need, for many, many years in India. She lived as a pauper while she did all this. Besides the example of Jesus, Mother Teresa epitomizes (she sets the example of) what I am trying to talk about this morning. When she spoke, you knew her words were genuine and deep. They were authentic. Here's an excerpt from her 1994 National Prayer Breakfast speech. She said and I quote:

It is not enough for us to say, "I love God." But I also have to love my neighbor. St. John says that you are a liar if you say you love God and you don't love your neighbor. How can you love God whom you do not see, if you do not love your neighbor whom you see, whom you touch, with whom you live? And so it is very important for us to realize that love, to be true, has to hurt. I must be willing to give whatever it takes not to harm other people and, in fact, to do good to them. This requires that I be willing to give until it hurts. Otherwise, there is no true love in me and I bring injustice, not peace, to those around me.

This quote by Mother Teresa is a deep one, for sure. Almost too deep for me. So while I was pondering the quote, "this requires that I be willing to give until it hurts," I felt a little bad when a juvenile thought, a smart remark, flashed through my head. Here was that thought... When you give, does it have to hurt a little, or does it have to hurt a lot? 'Cause if I'm left to choose based on pain, I may not be helping too many people...

Sorry for that diversion. But seriously, I bet we can get a better understanding of what Mother Teresa said by looking at how she carried herself. How she served, yet lived as a pauper. How it was never about Mother Teresa. She didn't appear to have that characteristic that you and I have where we have unofficial criteria or a "pecking order" to categorize people. All people were the same to her. All people were important to her.

Now when I mention the "pecking order," you know what I'm talking about. It's the measurement sticks that we all have to determine who is more important, whom we want to emulate, and with whom we want to associate.

We often tend to judge others' worth by the degrees that they've earned, or the "coolness" of their profession, or by the size of their home or brand of car. And the people who serve us – those people who take our orders at restaurants, or make our beds in hotels, or fix our cars... or those who report to us at work – they are somehow less important, less worthy.

Our natural tendency to judge and classify people leads us to make some wrong conclusions about the worth of a person, about a person's "dignity." Mother Teresa believed that dignity is not something that you acquire or arrive at after years of outstanding accomplishment or achievement. You are not dignified because of your family name, reputation or your college degree.

Dignity is tied to the nature of being human. Dignity is the enormous weight and value that every person is born with because we are created in the image of God. Dignity is God's signature written on the soul of every human being.

Mother Teresa not only knew that, it was branded on her soul.

So now I've raised the bar pretty high with the example of Mother Teresa. How do we as ordinary Christians, living our suburban lives, go forward? How do we keep our motives and attitudes in the right place in regard to pride and humility?

Let me leave you with 3 things to consider. Honoring these 3 things will help you in your march toward true humility...

1. First, stay teachable. Continue to be gripped by a desire to learn more – not only about the Bible, but about life – regardless of your physical age. Listen to opposing views. Listen to those in your family and those at work. And keep in mind that pride can be what gets in the way of learning because it keeps you from even recognizing a learning opportunity.
2. Second, try not to be obsessed with visibility, recognition, or significance. Many of God's greatest leaders are those who never receive the world's recognition. They go about their business faithfully, quietly, diligently, making a tremendous impact that may not be evident through common human measurements.
3. And third, steer away from comparison and entitlement. Try not to compare your work to those of others. For if you do, you'll either be filled with a false sense of security because you're beating the competition, or you become depressed because you are not doing as well as others. Either way, it's become all about you. Also, be aware that feelings of entitlement can ambush you at any time. You can tell this when you no longer feel humbled by the compliments and special treatment that you get from others. You decide that you deserve the recognition, the money, and the perks. In other words, don't lose touch with your roots.

And finally, as I draw to a close, I'll leave you with a short quote on the subject of true humility and it comes from one of our country's founders, Ben Franklin. Ben Franklin said, "*A man wrapped up in himself makes a small bundle.*"

Good quote, but I couldn't help but notice that his quote, "*A man wrapped up in himself makes a small bundle,*" does not contain inclusive language. But after pondering the quote a little longer, I recognized the hidden meaning, and perhaps, Ben Franklin got it right... Understanding humility is, I think, not a woman's problem.

Peace.