Humility Peace Presbyterian Church

Luke 18:9-14 Summer Parable Series

Elizabeth M. Deibert 11 August 2019

**Luke 18:9–14** (NRSV)

**9**He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: **10***“Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector.****11****The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector.****12****I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.’*

***13****But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’****14****I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.”*

It is safe to say that our world could use a little more humility. Our culture places so much value on external accomplishments, appearance, and self-aggrandizement. These days we do not even seem concerned about veracity of accomplishment, only the mere image of power and greatness. But the God we worship showed us a radically different power, the power made perfect in weakness. Paul said to the Philippians, “Have the same mind as Christ, who though he was God, did not cling to his godliness, but took the form of a servant, humbling himself.” Hear a few more scripture verses on humility.

Are there any of you who are wise and understanding? Prove it by your good life, by your good deeds performed with humility and wisdom. (James 3:13)

God brings down the proud and saves the humble. (Job 22:29)

Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. (Ephesians 4:2)

Humble yourselves, therefore, under God’s mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time. (1 Peter 5:6)

God guides the humble in what is right and teaches them his way. (Psalm 25:9)

“If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.” *(1 John 1:8)*

Oh, how we need to admit sin, admit weakness, admit imperfections, admit all we do not know -- without wallowing in shame or self-deprecation. It will liberate all of us and move us toward greater health and mutual benefit. We could stop wasting our time arguing and our energy trying to maintain the upper hand. I would love to see a political candidate humbly say and the electorate humbly agree that the issues of immigration, health care reform, and gun violence are complicated. Something needs to change, but the answer is not easy. It is not simple.

Oh, how refreshing it would be to move away from all the public boasting! As Finn and Evan pointed out in the parable group, even chest-pounding, a sign of humility and sorrow in the 1st century is now a way for athletes to boast. It was not always this way. The legendary coach of the UCLA Bruins men’s basketball team, John Wooden, said, *Talent is God-given. Be humble. Fame is human-given. Be grateful. Conceit is self-given. Be careful.*

During the Civil War someone reported to Abraham Lincoln that Edwin Stanton, one of the President’s cabinet members, had referred to him as a fool. Mr. Lincoln replied, “Well, I must check into that, for I have found that he is usually correct in his judgments.” Like President Lincoln, we must start with self-examination and stop finger-pointing at others.

Mother Teresa’s quote is worth hearing: *These are the few ways we can practice humility: To speak as little as possible of one’s self. To mind one’s own business. Not to want to manage other people’s affairs. To avoid curiosity. To accept contradictions and correction cheerfully. To pass over the mistakes of others. To accept insults and injuries. To accept being slighted, forgotten and disliked. To be kind and gentle even under provocation. Never to stand on one’s dignity. To choose always the hardest.*

(slide) C.S. Lewis had it right: *Humility is not thinking less of yourself, but thinking of yourself less.*

Here are four steps toward the cultivation of humility:

1. Understand your intrinsic value as a beloved child of God. Your self-worth is not dependent on the opinions of others.
2. Be mindful of your own and others’ strengths *and* weaknesses (without pride or shame, judgment or competition) Nobody’s good at everything.
3. Practice gratitude. Be grateful to God and to other people. Express it!
4. Embrace opportunities to grow through humility’s challenge to your ego.

Children and youth, the start of school will give you a chance to grow in humility. When you don’t understand, it’s okay. Just admit it. When you say or do the wrong thing to a friend or make your parents or a teacher mad, apologize humbly for your mistakes. When someone laughs at you, don’t be ashamed. Remember they laughed at Jesus too. You can handle it. Cormac and Sofia are leaving for college soon. They will have the chance of a lifetime to grow in humility as they discover the need to build their own support systems – friends, professors, counselors – who can be there for them in the hard times, when they stumble, as their families and friends have done while they still lived at home.

One of the things I noticed is that God is always giving me opportunities to stumble over the very thing I am preaching about – nearly every week – to keep me humble, to force me into practicing what I’m preaching. Jesus told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt. We could stop right there… as my little nephew used to say, “You were wight and I was wong.” Psychologists have found that often our contempt for others grows from our insecurity about self. The Pharisee’s trouble is that he needs to put someone down to feel better about himself. The tax collector simply knows he needs God’s mercy.

(slide) The ancient Jesus prayer comes directly from this parable: “Lord Jesus Christ, son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.” All who humble themselves will be exalted. Use that prayer to build humility with constant recitation.

Robert Farrar Capon has written three books on the Parables. He believes we should see this parable as going far beyond a simple lesson in humility. But we have to forget the prejudice that we 21st century folk might have toward Pharisees after generations of hearing stories about Jesus challenging the Pharisees for their self-righteous attitudes.

We have to remember that the Publican, the Tax Collector was one who everyone was glad to scorn. He is a crook, a mafia-style enforcer of Roman abuse slithering amongst his fellow Jews. This text does not tell us this, but from what we know of 1st century tax collectors, he was skimming the cream off every cup of milk he secured from them.

So the real scandal of this parable is that humility is the only thing that counts. Not success, not faithful behavior, not following the rules. No amount of goodness is good enough and no amount of badness is too bad. Humility is the answer. Humility is the virtue. It is the mother of all virtues.

Humility speaks truth, but does not need to be seen as right. Humility serves without accolade, without attention, without extrinsic reward. Humility seeks what it best for others, best for all.

Why do we argue? Because I think my way is better than yours. Because you think you work harder than me. Because I believe my needs are more important than yours. Comparisons.

Humility stops comparing self to others. The humble person is satisfied with the gifts of God and secure in the love of God. The humble person is willing to work on self, giving up the temptation to fix others. Only you can do you.

How did Jesus transform the lives of others? The powerful love of humility.

How did Jesus not argue with Pilate and go calmly to his unjust death? Humility.

What did Jesus have that we do not have? Humility.

How are we going to grow in Christ-likeness? Humility.

Prayer: God, help us to grow in gentle yet confident humility, forgiving others as You have forgiven us, being grateful every moment of every day for your mercy in Jesus Christ. Nourish us in your love, that we might be a light to the world. Amen.