

“Humble Thyself”

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University Presbyterian Church of Tempe, Arizona

Jeremiah 2.4-13 (NRSV)

⁴Hear the word of the Lord, O house of Jacob, and all the families of the house of Israel. ⁵Thus says the Lord: What wrong did your ancestors find in me that they went far from me, and went after worthless things, and became worthless themselves? ⁶They did not say, “Where is the Lord who brought us up from the land of Egypt, who led us in the wilderness, in a land of deserts and pits, in a land of drought and deep darkness, in a land that no one passes through, where no one lives?” ⁷I brought you into a

plentiful land to eat its fruits and its good things. But when you entered you defiled my land, and made my heritage an abomination. ⁸The priests did not say, “Where is the Lord?” Those who handle the law did not know me; the rulers transgressed against me; the prophets prophesied by Baal, and went after things that do not profit.

⁹Therefore once more I accuse you, says the Lord, and I accuse your children’s children.

¹⁰Cross to the coasts of Cyprus and look, send to Kedar and

examine with care; see if there has ever been such a thing. ¹¹Has a nation changed its gods, even though they are no gods? But my people have changed their glory for something that does not profit. ¹²Be appalled, O heavens, at this, be shocked, be utterly desolate, says the Lord, ¹³for my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living water, and dug out cisterns for themselves, cracked cisterns that can hold no water.

Luke 14.1, 7-14 (NRSV)

¹On one occasion when Jesus was going to the house of a leader of the Pharisees to eat a meal on the sabbath, they were watching him closely. . . .

⁷When he noticed how the guests chose the places of honor, he told them a parable. ⁸“When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not sit down at the place of honor, in case someone more distinguished than you has been invited by your host; ⁹and the host who invited both of

you may come and say to you, ‘Give this person your place,’ and then in disgrace you would start to take the lowest place. ¹⁰But when you are invited, go and sit down at the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he may say to you, ‘Friend, move up higher’; then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at the table with you. ¹¹For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.” ¹²He

said also to the one who had invited him, “When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. ¹³But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. ¹⁴And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.”

Humility is defined as the quality or condition of not being proud or arrogant, having a feeling insignificance or inferiority. Often we think of humility as “meekness” which coincides with being docile or submissive, spiritless even.

But our scripture challenges these definitions with a humility that can only be found in a strength found through a deep and long practiced spiritual trust in the wisdom and presence of the Holy One who led the people of Israel through many hardships. This kind of humility is not weak or even meek, but a strength in knowing ourselves as God knows us.

In the summer of 1986, two ships collided in the Black Sea off the coast of Russia. Hundreds of passengers died as they were hurled into the icy waters below. News of the disaster was made worse when the investigation revealed the cause of the accident was not a malfunction or even thick fog. The cause was human stubbornness. Each captain was aware of the other ship's presence and both could have easily steered clear, but according to the reports, neither captain was willing to give way to the other. Each was too proud to yield first. By the time they came to their senses, it was too late.

William Temple, the Archbishop of Canterbury in the Church of England, the closest thing the Anglican Church has to a pope, from 1942-1944, once wrote: "Humility does not mean thinking less of yourself than of other people, nor does it mean having a low opinion of your own gifts. It means freedom from thinking about yourself one way or the other at all."

You see, Christian humility, the kind of humility written about in the prophets of the Hebrew Scriptures and envisioned in the teachings of Jesus in the Christian Scriptures, is not about thinking lowly of yourself; rather, it's about recognizing the value of both the other as well as yourself. Humility is not about rolling over in the face of adversity, but standing strong in our convictions with the ability to recognize the cracks in our own moral armor. Humility is not an easy kind of love found inside a Hallmark card, but a willingness to put forth the effort and intentionality it takes to seek true and lasting relationships through diversity and doing the hard work of community building. Humility is not about recognizing our faults so much as recognizing our strengths as well as our limits, and realizing our mutual reliance on one another to not only survive but thrive as human beings. Christian humility is recognizing that we are empty without the love of God revealed in and through Jesus and realizing how costly that love can be, but seeking to live in it anyway because we know its unrealized worth.

Christian humility is loving our child enough to set limits, loving ourselves enough to seek Sabbath, loving our neighbors enough to lend a hand even when it is inconvenient, and loving the world enough to want to make a difference no matter how small and

without the need for recognition. It means loving God even more than our very selves and recognizing that God loves us more than we ever could.

Humility is not just about confessing our sins or recognizing our wrongs against God and one another, but actively seeking to transform our behavior according to the Way taught by Jesus, and rectify the wrongs we have intentionally or unintentionally committed, and constantly seeking to be in right relationship with our Creator as much as with that which the Creator loves.

Humility is not running away from or trying to avoid conflict, but recognizing its inevitability and engaging it lovingly and with the respect and love for the other people in our lives—whether friend, foe, or stranger—as is deserving of any child of God.

Humility is about celebrating the gifts of others rather than stewing in jealousy. Humility is about showing up even when it's hard, and being fully present in any given moment: mentally, emotionally, and spiritually as much as physically, even when we want to run fast and hard the other way, because we value commitment and loyalty to God through Jesus and to the global community of which we are a part.

Booker T. Washington, the renowned black educator of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, is an outstanding example of this kind of quiet strength that defines true humility. Shortly after he took over the presidency of the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, he was walking in one of the exclusive neighborhoods in town when a white woman stopped him and asked if he would like to earn a few dollars.

She obviously did not recognize who he was nor his social standing around town, and asked him if he would chop some wood for her. At that moment he had no where to be, so Professor Washington rolled up his sleeves proceeded to chop the wood for her. When he was finished he carried the logs into the house and stacked them by the fireplace.

A little girl within the household recognized him as he brought the wood into the house and later told the lady of the house who had initially made the offer to him. The next morning the woman was embarrassed and went to see Professor Washington in his office at the Institute and apologized profusely.

"It's perfectly all right, Madam," he replied. "Occasionally I enjoy a little manual labor. Besides, it's always a delight to do something for a friend."

She shook his hand warmly and assured him that his humble and gracious attitude had endeared him and his work to her heart. Not long afterward she showed her admiration by persuading some wealthy acquaintances to join her in donating thousands of dollars to the Tuskegee Institute.

Professor Washington could have flatly refused and asked the woman indignantly if she realized who he was. But humbly recognized the reality of the situation, and instead flipped the tables on her with quiet resolve. Humility of course is not a tactic to get what we want in hopes of some reward. It's a way of life into which we are called by the one who has called us to gather here for the benefit of the whole world. There are many people in our global history who have captivated this concept of strength in humility: Besides Jesus of Nazareth, there has been even in our own time the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Mahatma Gandhi, and Mother Theresa of Calcutta. None of them were figures I would choose to go up against because of their calculating determination, but they remain figures of immense humility and strength forged through the

challenges they faced and the faithfulness with which they met those challenges. I'm sure you have known people like this in your own lives, who know themselves well and have no need to shower themselves with praise. They are our teachers. They will never find their names in the headlines, but with quiet and faithful resolve they trudge forward in their God-given calling with the paradoxical strength of humility and faithfulness, and with the kind of love for all people that can only come from the Source of love that is God.

There is an old story about President Abraham Lincoln once getting caught up in a situation where he wanted to please a politician in order to garner his vote later, so he issued a command to transfer certain regiments in the midst of the Civil War. When the Secretary of War, Edwin Stanton, received the order, he refused to carry it out. He said that the President was a fool. Lincoln was told what Stanton had said, and he replied, "If Stanton said I'm a fool, then I must be, for he is nearly always right. I'll see for myself." The two men talked, and the President quickly realized that his decision was a serious mistake, and without hesitation he withdrew it.

Humility is many things, but the kind of humility shared through Jeremiah and in the teachings of Jesus is far from weak, meek, or submissive to anyone other than the God who created us, loves us,

and continues to stand with us in joy and in sorrow. May we seek to walk in the Way of Jesus with joy.