

Humility is Underrated
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“Humility is Underrated” Pilgrim Church UCC, October 23, 2016, Thirtieth Sunday in Ordinary Time (Luke 18:9-14)

Two guys walk into the Temple to pray—a Pharisee and a tax collector. The Pharisee lifts up his arms and voice to God and prays: “God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.”[1] Before you think I’m being overly dramatic, when people prayed in Jesus’ day a usual posture for prayer was standing with your eyes and arms uplifted to heaven and praying out loud. Perhaps some Christians who still pray this way aren’t as off base as we may think even if that’s not typically our style of prayer at Pilgrim! So that’s what the Pharisee prayed in Jesus’ parable, and that’s how he probably would have looked while praying in the Temple.

Meanwhile, the tax collector is standing far off. “Far off” could mean standing at a distance from the most holy place in the Temple (the holy of holies), standing at a distance from the Pharisee, or even standing at a distance from others at prayer. The tax collector might have been standing in an outer courtyard—to signify that he felt unworthy before God and in the presence of others. He doesn’t raise his eyes, arms, and voice to the heavens. Instead his manner of prayer shows that he is ashamed, beating his breast in extreme anguish and contrition. He prays: “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!”[2] all while looking down at his feet and not making eye contact with anyone who may have passed by him as they walked into the insider courtyards of the Temple.[3]

This parable may not seem all that radical to us, but to Jesus’ audience this parable is super offensive. Let’s remember that the Pharisees were a Jewish movement devoted to observing Torah, ritual purity, and piety before God. They redefined Judaism in a way that lasted. The Pharisees established the authority of Oral Torah alongside the Written Torah. They opened up observances that were once undertaken exclusively by priests to every Jew. So whatever their role within Judaism might have been in Jesus’ day, the Pharisees were the leaders who redefined Judaism after the Roman destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E. They were rather democratic and popular—reforming and reinterpreting the Jewish faith in a rapidly changing world.

Now tax collectors on the other hand were despised, almost universally despised. In the First Century, tax collectors were known to be untrustworthy cheaters, and pretty much everybody hated them. Kinda like how most people in this area don’t like the Yankees very much! This tax collector is Jewish, and we know that because he goes to the Temple to pray. By nature of him being a Jewish tax collector we also can assume that he’s taking advantage of his own people. In his line of work he collected tolls, market duties, and all kinds of local taxes (sales tax, income tax, property tax, and inheritance tax.) But tax collectors made a living by overcharging people, some saw them as Roman collaborators.

One can imagine that our tax collector goes to the Temple eyes downcast, beating his breast in the outer courtyard, praying while others look on with absolute disdain and scorn because he is a known untrustworthy cheater. And Jesus says he’s the one who gets it right. He’s the one who leaves justified—that lying, cheating, no good tax collector! People would have been so angry to hear Jesus say this! The liar and the cheat is the one who’s right with God? Really, Jesus? He’s the one with humility who’s showing exemplary behavior that you want us to emulate?

Well, yes. Because he's the one who's the most honest before God. This parable helps us contemplate what we value in people. Is humility a virtue that we take into account when we contemplate peoples' likeability or relatability? We just saw the last Presidential debate between Trump and Clinton this week. The only reason I could even watch at this point is because my Cleveland Indians clinched the American League Championship and are onto the World Series, so I was in a great mood that night. Throughout these debates, one can hear political analysts speak about who's "more presidential." It's worth asking what that really means. What do we believe it takes to be a good president? What personality traits, characteristics, gifts, virtues do we as individuals value in the person who holds the highest office in our nation?

We should ask this because in our parable Jesus values humility. That is the virtue that Jesus is lifting up as an example for everybody. If you want to be a good person, you had better be humble. It's worth asking if humility would even make the top five list of virtues that many Americans want our next president to possess. Christian scholar Robin Lovin points out, "The most important list of Christian virtues seems to put an emphasis on humility and service that contrasts sharply with the prevailing ideas of virtue in the society where those words first were spread, and in our own society too."^[4] From a Christian perspective, humility matters. So what does it say about society that humility seems to be underrated? Perhaps we acknowledge that Christianity is counter-cultural. Our values, norms, and behaviors as Christians are different than what mainstream culture often says is important. British author Monica Baldwin once wrote, "What makes humility so desirable is the marvelous thing it does to us; it creates in us a capacity for the closest possible intimacy with God." Humility opens us up to God in amazing, surprising ways.

Thinking of modern examples of humility—there was this great story out of the University of New Hampshire about an incredibly generous donation to the school from an unlikely source. Robert Morin (who graduated from the university in 1963) worked as a cataloguer in Dimond Library at UNH for just about 50 years. He wrote short descriptions of DVDs, entered the ISBN numbers of CDs, and catalogued books of sheet music at the library for decades. By all accounts he lived a modest life, though all that time Robert was quietly saving his money. He died over a year ago by now and this humble librarian ended up leaving the University of New Hampshire \$4 million.

With that money, the university is launching an expanded career center. With that money, the university will have a video scoreboard for the new football stadium. (Now using \$1 million for a football scoreboard angered some people, but the university explained that in the last 15 months of his life, Bob lived in an Assisted Living Center and began watching football and apparently came to love the sport. So they deemed that specific usage of the funds one that Bob would have approved. Who knows.) And with that money the Dimond Library will provide scholarships for work-study students, support staff members who want to continue their studies in Library Science, and some of the library's multimedia rooms will be renovated and upgraded with better technology.^[5] A lot of good will happen at that university because of this generous donation from an unlikely source—a humble school librarian who saved and donated to the place he loved most.

Jesus says that all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.^[6] Do we really believe that? We've been having many conversations in Lexington of late about the monumental stress and expectations put on our students. We should be asking where all this stress and these unrealistic expectations are coming from—from the school, from parents and guardians, from the community, from students themselves? Sometimes I lament that young people in our community may think they are not successful if they don't get into Harvard, MIT, Stanford, Yale, Brown, etc. Getting into a very small list of colleges and universities is viewed as you being successful as a human being.

Did you get mad just now if I left your beloved alma mater off the list? Are we part of the problem? This is not to say that humble people cannot be found at any “prestigious school” (however one defines that.) This is not to say that some of you who work or teach at these “prestigious schools” are not humble. And this is not to say that schools that don’t make that small list of what future success seems to look like in Lexington, Massachusetts are not good schools. We can continually ask ourselves as a community what success means and what success really looks like. We can challenge notions of success that make our young people feel bad about themselves. Because that librarian, Bob Morin, who worked at the University of New Hampshire for almost 50 years and left \$4 million to his beloved school is a success story. It’s a story of humility, and that’s part of what makes it a success story from a Christian perspective.

The challenge Jesus leaves us with is to be like that humble tax collector. Because back in those days the Pharisee was the success story and the tax collector was the failure. Jesus says the tax collector goes away right with God, and we can’t overlook that.

To go to God with honesty for ways that we fall short and we mess up. To pour our hearts out to God when things seem hopeless. To acknowledge our weakness, our sins, and our shame. To fling our hopes on the grace of God that surpasses all human understanding. To trust and depend on God to be there for us no matter what we’re facing. My friends, this is what humility looks like. Maybe being humble is different than what others would say is admirable or even successful. But as Christians we may need to get used to that. Thanks be to God. Amen.

[1] Luke 18:11-12, NRSV.

[2] Luke 18:13.

[3] Arland J. Hultgren, *The Parables of Jesus: A Commentary*, 118-127.

[4] Robin W. Lovin, *Christian Ethics: An Essential Guide*, 68.

[5] “Long-Time Librarian Surprises UNH with \$4 Million Gift,” *The University of New Hampshire*, August 30, 2016, <https://www.unh.edu/unhtoday/news/release/2016/08/30/long-time-librarian...>

[6] Luke 18:14.