

Pentecost 16, Proper 21
Church of the Good Shepherd, Silver City, NM

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Rev. Paul Moore

How to Be the Humblest Person You Know

You know, I'm really not fit to preach this sermon. The topic is humility, and if you really knew me you would know that I'm one of the most prideful people in the church today.

(Long pause...)

And I know exactly what you're thinking, You see, it's really going exactly to plan. You're thinking, "Why he's one of the most humble people I know. Just the other day...(and you give an example of something humble I did and how much it impressed you.) He's crazy--he has no idea how special he is." And knowing what you're thinking, I would be happy because you're thinking well of me! When you think well of me it makes me feel good! And so you see, it is true—I AM one of the most prideful people here, for with a bit of reverse psychology I got you to think well of me so that I might feel good. You see how self-absorbed I am?

No, the truly humble person is the one who speaks least about it in him or herself. As the Zen ditty goes, he speaks does not know, and he who knows does not speak. However, the Scripture lessons today have to do with humility, and so we must speak of it

The first lesson deals with an Israel in exile. All the important people in Judah have been shipped off to Babylon by Nebuchadnezzar, the King. Ezekiel speaks to a people that were really disappointed in God. There were four things the Israelites believed in and held as inviolable doctrines.

- They believed that the covenant God had established at Sinai centuries before would never be broken. Yes, they hadn't always measured up, but God is merciful. He would never actually abandon his people.
- They believed that the land of Israel was theirs by divine right. God owned it, God gave it to them, God would never make them leave it.
- They believed that Jerusalem was God's chosen city. It was David's city, the great king of Israel. God would never force them out of this special place.
- And they believed in the Davidic dynasty. God had promised that a descendent of David would always sit on the throne in Jerusalem. God would never break this

line.

Ezekiel comes along and says, “Israel’s violations of the covenant were so bad that God has trashed ALL of the above. He has broken the covenant of protection and blessing. He has taken us from the promised land. He has driven us from Jerusalem, and he has put someone else on David's throne.”

The people respond, “Ok, ok, our ancestors weren't paragons of virtue and faithfulness, but why do we have to pay for their transgressions? That's not really fair, is it? My granddaddy bows to an idol once and I end up in Babylon!”

But Ezekiel's response to that is, “You can't wiggle out of this one. Accept the fact that God has judged Israel. Accept the fact that God judges you. God will judge each one of us individually based on our current state of affairs. Though another's sins got you here, your sins are what condemn you, and your righteousness is what saves you.”

Humility is recognizing the sovereignty of God. The world is in God's hands, not yours. There is only one life you can change, and that is your own. Stand humbly before your God.

In the Gospel lesson Jesus takes up the same theme. The Jews question Jesus' authority. He answers with a question about John the Baptist. Was he from God or was he out on his own little ego trip? Jesus neatly catches them between their ego and their reputation. If they go with their ego and say, "No, he was his own man," then the people will bad-mouth them. If they go with what the people believe then they are saying one thing and doing another! They cannot just dismiss John as irrelevant because they didn't like him.

Jesus tells them the parable of the two sons. Both say one thing and do another, so neither is without sin, but one ends up doing what the father asks, and the other does not. One is prideful and goes his own way, the other humbly recognizes the will of another.

Then Jesus nails them to the wall: “All the people you judge, the druggies and the prostitutes, the traffickers and extortionists, the dirty politicians and corrupt policemen, John the Baptist, these people are getting in ahead of you because they repented and you didn't.” In the end the Pharisees are no better or worse than the people they judge so harshly.

Humility is recognizing the equality of value of others. It has been said that true maturity is reached when we realize that everyone else’s gifts and sins are really no greater or less than our own. They are as worthy or unworthy as you. They have as much a right to sit

at the table of humanity as you. Every person is a valid presence who has something to contribute to the conversation.

Here's a way to get a grip on this: We are told to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength. The other day Karisse and I were watching the sunset. We watched the colors of the clouds change, and the play of light on the hills out toward Bayard and Hurley, and reflecting off the Kneeling Nun. She commented, "This is one of the few places on earth where we look east to enjoy the sunset!" Before you knew it the light had changed, pink became purple, purple became grey, and the sun had set. Catching the moment was impossible. This is a spectacle given and received. One cannot for a moment control the sunset, all one can do is control where one looks and what one thinks of what one sees. Enjoying the sunset is an act of surrender to the mystery of the gift of God.

Humility is surrender to God. It means to surrender to the God who loves you. That love is unconditional, limitless and eternal, yes, and ours is conditioned, limited and temporal, So as the created loving the creator, we humbly acknowledge the source of all love, of all relationship, and we enter the presence of the One who is our source and our end.

It means to surrender to the God who judges you, Whose heart of love and mercy is the touchstone of divine justice, whose limitless love shows ours to be so inferior, and who judges us by our willingness to humbly enter into relationship with the divine ground of our being, not on what our parents did or did not do, and not on our preconceived ideas about what God will or will not do, but surrender to a relationship between greater and lesser, nothing more, and nothing less.

It is ultimately to embrace the mystery of God without seeking to control or reduce it.

We are told to love our neighbors as ourselves. Recently I bought Karisse her birthday present early. It is a little African desert tortoise named "Churchy," from the Pogo cartoon. Karisse has made up a little terrarium for him. She made a little cave for him, she put in a water dish, and daily she picks dandelions and other greens for him to eat. Then she sits there and delights in his every move. Now she is not a turtle, she does not give Churchy venison stew and biscuits like she does me, she does not give him spaghetti and meatballs. But she knows what turtles need, and she works to serve this little turtle's every need as a turtle. She surrenders her nurturing instincts to the reality of what the turtle really is.

Compared to ourselves, everyone else is a turtle. We may have our lives, and we are at the center of them. That is really the way it must be, for we are custodians of our own

little corners of the world. But if we put ourselves in the center of our world, then we must at least acknowledge that another is the center of theirs, and that together we live in a world that is greater than either our world or theirs. Loving my neighbor means serving them where they stand in their world with no thought of trying to force them into my world. Humility means to embrace the mystery of the other person without seeking to control or reduce it.

This will, of course, cost us something. Our own egos have a driving desire to create the world in our image. We would like to take God and put him in our pocket like a \$100 dollar bill. When we need him we will pull him out and he will do tricks for us, miracles that make our world go more closely according to our own will. And we would like to take other people and place them around in our lives, like flowers on the windowsill to brighten our days, or like munchkins who do our bidding. Humility will cost us the rule of our egos. As long as the ego is on the throne there is no true humility. It must be dethroned, relegated to its proper place, and on its empty throne the Holy Spirit of God must be seated. To the ego it feels like death, but it is life to the soul and to the whole person. Humility is a death-and-resurrection thing to do. But as we saw in the Epistle lesson today, Jesus did it before us, so we can walk that way as well in humble obedience.

So am I the most prideful person here? Probably so, but I'd rather not talk about it!