

sermon-Newport Pres. Church 11/02/08
“Authority in Humility”
Matt. 23:1-12
By Jim Patton

Mark Twain once observed the moment a person seems to have achieved real humility, it is destroyed by the pride at having accomplished it! True humility does not come easily. False humility, on the other hand, is a different matter. It can be spotted a mile away. Golda Meier once said to one of her cabinet members, “Don’t be so humble; you’re not that great.” We know exactly what she meant.

True humility is difficult in a status seeking age, where it is acceptable to pump oneself up. We have pushed self-esteem to such a level that many expect praise for what they have done, even if they don’t deserve it, even if it is false praise. There was an article in this past week’s paper that said we are experiencing a humility crises in our country. When we hear some say the United States is better than any other country, or my religion is better than other religious persuasions, we are far from humility. We need to put ourselves in the shoes of those who live in another country or worship in a different way to hear how that comes across.

This election year we have seen numerous exaggerations that are about as far from true humility as one can get. I don’t know about you, but when I see senators interviewed on the news and they refer to each other as “My esteemed colleague” it is about enough to make one gag! It is not so much their words as it is the attitude of privilege or superiority that seems to exude from the personalities of some of our elected officials.

Basically true humility is, as one scholar noted, not a natural thing. One does not naturally come to be truly humble. It is more a gift of grace. As he says, “Humility is not in the order of creation, but in the order of new creation.” It is one of the gifts of the Spirit we recognize whenever the commonwealth of God breaks into life on earth.

What does true humility look like? Our passage in Matthew gives us some helpful hints. Jesus says we are not to call anyone rabbi because we are all students. We all have something to learn from each other. It is true that some have special training in a discipline, but that does not mean they have nothing to learn.

Jesus was exaggerating here to make a point. He was speaking against the hierarchical structure in his own religion. Jesus felt making distinctions simply because of a title given was not appropriate. So, he says, don’t get too caught up in titles like rabbi, Father, or teacher.

Rabbi literally means “my great one.” Jesus was most concerned about those rabbis who really believed they were great ones as compared to the rest of us. As one commentator says, the goal Matthew promotes is an egalitarian community “where all are students of Jesus and children of God. The proper recognition of divine authority relativizes all

human authorities.” All those in positions of authority in our culture must come to terms with this if they are to be truly humble.

Next Jesus say be careful how you act. His reminds the Pharisees not to seek the best seats in the synagogue. I am not sure how this would translate today. What are the best seats in our sanctuary? I know the most popular seats are certainly not the front row!

Jesus’ point still stands. We need to be very careful not to act in such a way that we magnify our own importance. True leaders, says Jesus, are the ones that serve. Those who are truly humble seek to serve rather than be served. That sounds simple. We know otherwise.

The ultimate example of servant leadership, of course, is Jesus. He served us and humbled himself, even to the point of death on a cross. When Matthew wrote his gospel he could say with conviction that even though Jesus humbled himself in this life, he was exalted by God in the life to come. So, says Matthew, if we humble ourselves, we don’t need to worry about being exalted. God will take care of that.

This weekend we celebrate All Saints Day. This is a great time to remember the saints in our lives who have shown us how to be humble. I suspect each of us have some person that comes to mind.

I remember a man in my first church in Medford, Oregon. Sam was legally blind. He worked for Goodwill Industries shining shoes. He barely made enough to get by. Surprisingly, given his poor sight, he rode his bicycle to work. One day he hit a tree branch and was pretty seriously banged up. I went to see him at his home. He lived in a virtual shack. He had little furniture. The house was in terrible repair.

When I was about to leave, Sam asked me if I could take his weekly offering to church since he was not going to be able to go. I can’t remember the exact amount, but I think it was something like \$35 dollars. This was twenty-five years ago. I was stunned. He was giving out of his meager salary in a sacrificial way that few of us ever approach. And he did it without fanfare. Such humility is stunning. It has the power to change those who experience it. I began to see that true humility carries its own authority, its own power to change lives.

Kant, the great philosopher, once said the human condition was all about the “search for an answer to three questions: What can I know? What ought I to do? For what may I hope? When it came to hope, Kant said the shape of our hope is determinative of the way we live.”

That is a nice summary. My guess would be that where we place our hopes is also determinative of how humble we can be. If our hope is placed in God and not in our ability to be powerful, wealthy, or esteemed by others, then we will welcome the gift of humility. If our hope is placed in our ability to satisfy our wants, in our ability to be

admired by others, in our popularity among our peers, then humility would threaten the source of our hopes.

As we take communion this day, let us pray for the gift, the grace, and the desire to be humble. Let us remember those who have gone before, especially Jesus, and learn from their example of humble service. Amen