

Humble or Humbled?

A Sermon for Pilgrim Congregational Church, UCC, Lexington

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Text

Matthew 23:1-12:

23Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, ²“The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat; ³therefore, do whatever they teach you and follow it; but do not do as they do, for they do not practice what they teach. ⁴They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others; but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them. ⁵They do all their deeds to be seen by others; for they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long. ⁶They love to have the place of honor at banquets and the best seats in the synagogues, ⁷and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have people call them rabbi. ⁸But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all students. ⁹And call no one your father on earth, for you have one Father—the one in heaven. ¹⁰Nor are you to be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Messiah. ¹¹The greatest among you will be your servant. ¹²All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted.

Prayer

Sermon

¹¹The greatest among you will be your servant. ¹²All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted.

Humble. An adjective meaning not proud or haughty; not arrogant.... (Merriam Webster)

Humble:

A verb

To make oneself humble

Or to be made humble by someone else.

It’s different from

Humiliate

A verb

to reduce (someone) to a lower position in one's own eyes or others' eyes; to make (someone) ashamed or embarrassed.

To humble oneself or to be humbled is different, too, from being shamed.

And being shamed is different again from being accountable

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It seems like today would be a good day to tell you a story from seventeen years ago.

It's a story about me, and a story about one of my mentors, someone who taught me to preach, taught me about worship, taught me about pastoral care.

Seventeen years ago, they were accused of a boundary violation, in other words, they were accused of doing a bad bad thing.

I could not believe it. I would not believe it. They weren't the kind of person to have done this and therefore they could not have done this. Furthermore, they told me and others they didn't do it, and they counted on us to come to their defense.

So, we started working the problem. Outraged on their behalf, we wrote letters, sent emails, called the powers that be, waved our arms wildly and stomped our feet in defense of all that was good and in defense of our mentor.

And then we found out that the accusation of abuse was true. Irrefutable evidence came to light. My mentor had indeed put glory over service, had stopped thinking the rules applied to them, and had flown too close to the sun. And they'd hurt someone.

Which created, for me, an entirely different problem.

If my instructor did this, then what would it mean for me, someone who had learned like a disciple at their feet? If I trusted someone like that, was I trustworthy? And, why did I get so busy defending my teacher that I had not even considered the impact of what they'd done to a vulnerable person?

It was a profound teaching moment.

What I learned was a lesson in the difference between being humble and being humbled in that time. It's the event that led me to committing a portion of my time every year to boundary awareness training with other clergy. Basically, what we invite other clergy to do is to remain humble, to understand fallibility not as a problem but as a protective mechanism. Those who think they are perfect are those most likely to do harm.

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So, what's going on with Jesus and the Pharisees in this passage?

First off, whenever we see the Pharisees set up in opposition to Jesus in the gospels, we need to be careful not to move into anti-semitism but to remember this was a dialogue within Judaism.

"[This] was a family fight, and the name-calling and harsh rhetoric flourished."¹ Matthew's also using a double rhetoric here - Jesus is talking to his disciples and Matthew is mapping the ideas onto the early church and its leaders. "Matthew is addressing a problem that infected Judaism, early Christianity, and the early church - the love of place and preference among the servants of God."²

Second, I think this is, at its simplest, a critique of arrogance and pride, and a lifting up of humility.

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The wordplay here is really interesting, and I actually looked at a bunch of different translations and back at the Greek, at the last sentence in our text. "All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted." So often the verbs are inconsistent across translations but not with this sentence. "All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted." There's a choice here. The way you choose to act impacts how you will be treated; if you act with humility, you will not be humbled by someone else or by the circumstances you find yourself in.

Jesus came along and started offering a different interpretation of their shared tradition, an alternative worldview. Jesus has respect for their shared tradition but not their practice; he was claiming they were not working to please God and serve the people but to win adulation; not serving the common good but seeking their own benefit.

¹ Ringe, http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=998

² Craddock, et al, Preaching Through the Christian Year A, page 498

The tricky thing is, it's really hard to be humble when you are certain you are right. The Pharisees as portrayed through the Gospels were folks in positions of authority who had an unhealthy belief in their own righteousness.

And when something calls your worldview and identity into question, it's even harder to choose curiosity, flexibility and humility over defensiveness. If you have a sense of being humbled by someone else's words or humiliated and you're in very difficult territory. When we're defensive, we can't learn or grow. It's really easy, when the stakes are high, to focus on yourself, your reputation or identity, when you feel humiliated or shamed. Worldview shifts require humility or they break you like an earthquake breaks a building whose columns are too brittle. But choosing to be humble also, I think, puts the focus on the needs of the other rather than one's own appearance, which then becomes a tool in what I've been talking about for the last few weeks, other-focused self-giving agape love.

Jesus himself was humble enough to learn and grow when he met a Canaanite woman - Matthew tells this story in chapter 15. He knew his ministry was not supposed to serve her kind, but for the sake of her daughter she pushed back on his rejection. And something changed in him, and his second response was: "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish."

I've been listening to a lot of Brene Brown's talks on shame and accountability recently, and in the footnotes I'm going to link to a particular speech that I find very helpful.³ She has a mantra that she repeats to herself when she's feeling the emotions of shame or humiliation and she's wondering if there's something she needs to change. In other words, this is her mantra for staying humble. "I am here to get it right, I am not here to be right. I am here to get it right, I am not here to be right."

There is good news here, for clergy and politicians, for teachers and parents, for spouses and partners, for you and for me. When we are here to get it right, not to appear right - when we are humble and willing to listen and practice self-examination, this helps us live the good news of love, compassion and justice with and for our neighbors.

Doesn't that sound like what Jesus was calling the Pharisees out over? What he wanted his followers to do?

³ <https://brenebrown.com/transcript/brene-on-shame-and-accountability/>

I imagine Jesus saying, don't just preach or tweet to win followers and a prominent place at the banquet table, don't just walk around feathering your cap to look swell, don't seek your own glory and don't trust that you are always the most righteous in the room. Every day, choose again to do what is right, to do what will serve your neighbors, to do what will give glory to God, to do what will serve the common good.

That's what earns trust. At the end of the day,

¹¹The greatest among you will be your servant. ¹²All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted.

Amen.