

“Humility”

Rev. Dr. David E. Gray

Bradley Hills Presbyterian Church

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Philippians 2: 1-11

Two Tuesdays ago I parked in the church parking lot as I typically do on the office side. When you pull in the sidewalk is a little high at places as you park. Late that afternoon I pulled out to head to the September Presbytery meeting. However, I found that I had pulled my car in a bit too far, so when I pulled it out part of my car's undercarriage ripped off, enough that it was hanging there from the bottom, making it difficult to drive. Have you ever done that?

Now I was a bit stuck. I was chair of the Presbytery's stated clerk search committee and at the Presbytery meeting that evening I had to lead the discussion and nomination of the new stated clerk. I had to get to the meeting. So I went inside and got some rope, duct tape and string and taped up the undercarriage of my car. I said a prayer and then I headed out on the road. It was a humbling experience. There I went, riding down Bradley Boulevard with the blinkers on at 15 miles an hour trying to go slow enough that the bottom of the car didn't fall apart. Cars honking. Bradley is a one lane each way road as you know so it's hard for cars to pass me. I got lots of angry folks honking behind me. It was an exercise in humility.

Sometimes our lives seem held by only duct tape and string and prayer. But sometimes the taste of humble pie isn't so bad.

Let us pray. Gracious and loving God, may your spirit come to us now helping us realize how in Christ you humbled yourself. And how we should strive to do the same. Amen.

Muhammad Ali once said, "Humble people, I've found, don't get very far." In a time of Donald Trumps and presidential debates where candidates are criticized for being too unassuming Ali's statement seems to sum up a modern American attitude. It was actually an ancient attitude as well. Scholar Morna Hooker writes that in the broader Romans and Greek worlds, humility was not a virtue. It was associated with servant classes. The only time humility was a real virtue was in respect to the Gods.

In his letter to the church at Philippi, the Apostle Paul urged a different attitude. An attitude of humility towards not only God, but towards our world. Paul's life trajectory was one of moving from believing he had all the answers about life and about what to do with people who disagreed with him, to becoming a more tolerant Christian who put Jesus first. Paul challenged the Philippians to give up selfish ambition and to look to Christ Jesus as their model.

Paul was able to suggest a new attitude for Christians because Jesus made humility a virtue. For Christ was fully God yet humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death on the cross. Paul wrote that God "exalted him and gave him a name above every name so that at the name of Jesus, every knee shall bow." Jesus gave us a spirit of humility and gained greater glory through his humility.

William Barclay called Philippians 2 "in many ways the greatest and most moving passage Paul ever wrote about Jesus." Paul's letter to the Philippians is largely about finding joy in the midst of feeling low. He wrote his letter from prison when he was suffering. He realized that even in a lowly state he could be happy and blessed. He lifted up the idea that the highest rewards in life come not in thinking we have all the answers, but in opening ourselves to the questions. Not in self obsession and promotion, rather in regarding others as equals and encouraging recognition of the achievements, rights and value of others. Professor Jorge Rieger lifted up this idea last week in his Andrews lectures, pointing out how Paul wrote to the Corinthians about the lesser parts of the body of Christ being of upmost importance. Not in holding one's head too high but in picking up one's cross and following Christ. I think of the Sermon on the Mount and Jesus' statement that the meek will inherit the earth. When Paul was in prison and his life seemed to be hanging from a string, he suggested in his letters that Christ's once was too. In the incarnation God came to us in humility. And so for the Christian, Muhammad Ali's statement about humility is a not right. For those who seek to be like Christ, humility is an important part of discipleship.

Sometimes things happen in life that makes us humble. In January 2010, a Florida lady did her shopping and, upon returning to her car, found four young males in the act of leaving with the vehicle. She dropped her shopping bags and drew her handgun, proceeding to scream at the top of her voice, "I have a gun. Get out of the car!" The four men didn't wait for a second invitation. They got out and ran like mad. The lady proceeded to put her shopping bags into the car and got into the driver's seat. She was so shaken that she could not get her key into the ignition. She tried and tried, and then it dawned on her why. It was the same reason she did not understand why there was a football, a Frisbee and 12 cans of beer in the front

seat! A few minutes later, she found her own car parked four or five spaces farther down. She loaded her bags into the car and drove to the police station to report her mistake. It takes strength to realize you have made a mistake and to admit it.

But we all make them. And we can be grateful for our small mistakes because they help us course correct so we can avoid more serious ones. Jason Reid's column in Thursday's edition of the Washington Post argues that the concussion Robert Griffin III suffered last Sunday could be a valuable mistake that teaches him to avoid a more serious injury later on. I am still trying to find a silver lining in the Nationals loss on Friday.

Karl Barth wrote in his book Church Dogmatics that the "real issue of theology is not whether God exists, that's easy, the issue is why God allows us to exist, with all we do wrong." If God notices all we do wrong and lets us live, the only explanation is that God loves us. And if God notices us and loves us, God must be saving us. Saving us from ourselves. Saving us for something special.

Our humility begins with the way we approach God. For that is the most intimate and personal relationship there is. N.T. Wright writes in his book, Simply Christian, that Jesus offers us freedom, freedom to explore our world in a new way. One in which the habits and pressures that motivate us to be cut throat and aggressive are replaced by love. Freedom from reliance on the limited resources we each have to relying on the unlimited power of the cross.

And then our humility can impact how we view our church. Last Sunday I preached at an installation service of a woman who became the pastor of a centuries old church in the Baltimore Presbytery. The church has two parts, a pulpit in the middle and two rows down the sides. The two sides of the sanctuary cannot see each other. It's a reminder that the divisions within the church throughout history. Barclay writes that disunity was the one danger that most threatened the church in Philippi. It threatens every healthy church. Where there is enthusiasm, ideas can clash and there can be conflict. Unless the members put on the humility of Christ and regard him as the head of the church, that can become a challenge.

Humility is the byproduct of our knowledge that the God has created us and has chosen to love us. That our time on earth is short compared to the time horizon of our sovereign God. And that if we have any hope for salvation, for eternal life and

for the kind of joy that Paul wrote about in his letter to the Philippians, it must come from God. That should allow us to live with humility.

James Stewart, one of the greatest preachers of the 20th century, was once speaking at an event and while pulling his car up to the lecture hall was told that the parking spot he had pulled into was reserved for the V.I.P. who was giving the lecture. Never considering himself a V.I.P., Stewart moved his car to another lot and walked the half mile back to the lecture hall to give his talk. His biographers wrote that Stewart was known for a humility that came from the love of God he had experienced in his own life.

If our titles can't get us where we want to go, maybe our humble trust in God can open the doors. In his book *The Call*, Os Guinness wrote of the burial ceremony of Emperor Franz Josef in 1916. When the Emperor died, his entourage arrived at a monastery and knocked at the gate. From inside a voice asked, "Who are you, who knocks?" The Emperor's herald said, "I am Franz Josef, Emperor of Austria, King of Hungary." From inside, "I don't know you. Tell me again who you are." "I am Frank Josez, Emperor of Austria, King of Hungary, Bohemia, and Galicia," said his Herald. "We still don't know you. Who are you?" Whereupon the herald knelt down and said, "I am Franz Josef, a poor sinner humbly begging for God's mercy." "You may enter then," the Abbot said, and the doors were flung open. At the name of Jesus, every knee shall bend.

Rather than being for the weak, the humility Christ offers is for the free, the brave and the saved. Let us accept that offer.

Being a Christian means patterning our life after the one who gave of his time, talent and treasure, who gave up a safe place to give those on earth access to a new way of living, and who ultimately gave up his life for us. It means a new kind of confidence, built on appreciation of eternal values. It means a freedom from relying on ourselves to our relying on God. It means life held together by more than duct tape and string. A life made possible through the selfless love of our humble Lord. Amen.