

Green Hill Presbyterian Church
“Divine Humility”
Thomas G. Speers, III
Ordinary 26—October 1, 2017

Lessons: Philippians 2:1-13; Matthew 21:23-32.

“Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.” So Paul instructs the Philippian church, a church he regarded with special affection, and whose internal division and strife hurt him terribly. Be like Jesus. That, of course, is our calling as Christians—to be like Jesus—and it is easier said than done. We don’t always know what Jesus would do in any given situation. The world is a different place today than it was in the time of Jesus. Jesus’ life was different from ours. Jesus didn’t go to high school. Jesus didn’t serve on corporate boards. Jesus didn’t have to struggle to provide for a family. Jesus didn’t know the frustrations of dealing with the temper tantrum of a four year old or an early adolescent. There are, as Jesuit Father Walter Burghardt explains, “realizations of faith, hope, and love which in his restricted life Jesus did not and could not experience. He was a man, not a woman; he was a teacher, not a scholar; he did not experience old age or Alzheimer’s disease; he never even lived to become a Jesuit!”¹

So if we are called to be like Jesus, what does that look like. Paul suggests that we are called to “be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.” In humility, regards othes as better than yourselves. That’s one way to follow Jesus.

Now humility is often and easily misunderstood. Fred Buechner suggests that it “is often confused with the gentlemanly self-depreciation of saying you’re not much of a bridge player when you know perfectly well you are. Conscious or otherwise, this kind of humility is a form of gamesmanship.

“If you really *aren’t* much of a bridge player, you’re apt to be rather proud of yourself for admitting it so humbly. This kind of humility is a form of low comedy.

“True humility doesn’t consist of thinking ill of yourself but of not thinking of yourself much differently from the way you’d be apt to think of anybody else. It is the capacity for being no more and no less pleased when you play your own hand well than when your opponents do.”² Humility, as defined in my dictionary has to do with being aware of our own shortcomings, of being unpretentious, of showing deferential respect. It does not mean that you need to let yourself get walked all over. It does not mean that

¹ Walter J. Burghardt, SJ, *Aging: A Long Loving Look at the Real*, in *Graying Gracefully: Preaching to Older Adults*, edited by William J. Carl © 1997 Westminster John Knox Press

² Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking, A Theological ABC*, © 1993 Harper Collins.

your own opinions don't matter; they do. It is not "a comfortable excuse for incompetence, submissiveness, self-denigration, and defeat."³ However, it does mean that we remain open to the opinions and experiences of others, that we remain open to learning of God through them. And when we know our own shortcomings, then we can be more understanding about the shortcomings of those around us. That's what Jesus was like. He was never afraid of meeting with so called "unclean" people. Sometimes he found that they were the first one to change their lives and to start living as God would have us all live. So he challenges the respectful people, the believers who are quick to point out that they are believers, and that they will do the work of God, but then don't actually get around to doing it or do it only half way. Jesus says to those who talk the talk but don't walk the walk, "it isn't you, but rather the tax collectors and prostitutes who are going into God's realm first.

The problem of the respectable folks is that they tend to separate themselves from others; they build up barriers in the community, instead of showing deferential respect. We are meant to use our power, our position, our authority on behalf of those without it; we're called to practice the difficult task of giving away our power continually. That's divine humility.

It makes me wonder on this World Communion Sunday if we could ever become more humble as a nation. Too often we assume that we have all the answers, that we know best how to deal with every problem facing the world, and that the rest of the world better follow our lead because after all, we are the greatest nation in the world. We are sometimes guilty of a kind of national arrogance.

Remember when Winston Churchill suggested that "Many forms of Government have been tried, and will be tried in this world of sin and woe. No one pretends that democracy is perfect or all-wise. Indeed it has been said that democracy is the worst form of Government except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time..."⁴ Could we ever show that kind of humility as a nation?

Henri Nouwen⁵ speaks of a theology of weakness which "is not a theology for weaklings but a theology for men and women who claim for themselves the power of love. It is this power that frees them from fear... Yes, we are poor, gentle, mourning, hungry, thirsty for justice, merciful, pure of heart, peacemakers, and persecuted by a hostile world. (Women who will be studying the Sermon on the Mount, take note of those characteristics.) But we are not weaklings, not doormats. The kingdom of heaven is ours, the earth our inheritance. We are comforted, have our fill, experience mercy, are recognized as God's children, and see God. That's power, real power—power that comes from above.

³ Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Finding My Way Home*, The Crossroad Publishing Company © 2001 The Estate of Henri J. M. Nouwen.

⁴ Winston Churchill, *Churchill By Himself*, Richard Langworth, editor. Ebury Press © 2008 The Estate of Winston S. Churchill.

⁵ Nouwen, *Ibid.*

“You and I are called to move from power to power through powerlessness. As fearful, anxious, insecure, and wounded people we are tempted constantly to grab the little bit of power the world offers us... But insofar as we dare to be baptized into powerlessness, always moving towards the poor who have no worldly power, we will be plunged right into the heart of God’s endless mercy. We will be free to reenter our world with the same divine power with which Jesus came. We will be able to walk in the valley of darkness and tears, unceasingly in communion with God, with our heads erect, confidently standing under the cross of our life.” Look out for the community first; God is already looking out for you. That’s what real humility is about.

Years ago, Judge Learned Hand wrote a piece about the Spirit of Liberty that I believe could also be used to describe the spirit of true faith. He said, “The spirit of liberty is the spirit which is not too sure that it is right; the spirit of liberty is the spirit which seeks to understand the minds of other men and women; the spirit of liberty is the spirit which weighs their interest alongside its own without bias; the spirit of liberty remembers that not even a sparrow falls to earth unheeded; the spirit of liberty is the spirit of him who, near two thousand years ago, taught mankind that lesson it has never learned, but has never quite forgotten - that there may be a kingdom where the least shall be heard and considered side-by-side with the greatest.”⁶ Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.

Finally, let me read this passage again, this time from Gene Peterson’s paraphrase, *The Message*: “If you’ve gotten anything at all out of following Christ, if his love has made any difference in your life, if being in a community of the Spirit means anything to you, if you have a heart, if you care--then do me a favor: Agree with each other, love each other, be deep-spirited friends. Don’t push your way to the front; don’t sweet-talk your way to the top. Put yourself aside, and help others get ahead. Don’t be obsessed with getting your own advantage. Forget yourselves long enough to lend a helping hand.

“Think of yourselves the way Christ Jesus thought of himself. He had equal status with God but didn’t think so much of himself that he had to cling to the advantages of that status no matter what. Not at all. When the time came, he set aside the privileges of deity and took on the status of a slave, became human! Having become human, he stayed human. It was an incredibly humbling process. He didn’t claim special privileges. Instead, he lived a selfless, obedient life and then died a selfless, obedient death—and the worst kind of death at that: a crucifixion.

“Because of that obedience, God lifted him high and honored him far beyond anyone or anything, ever, so that all created beings in heaven and on earth—even those long ago dead and buried—will bow in worship before this Jesus Christ, and call out in praise that he is the Master of all, to the glorious honor of God the Father.”⁷ Be like

⁶ B. Learned Hand, *The Spirit of Liberty*; *Papers and Addresses of Learned Hand*. © 1952 Alfred A. Knopf.

⁷ Eugene H. Peterson, *The Message*, *The Bible in Contemporary English*, NavPress © 2002 Eugene H. Peterson.

Jesus. Follow his example.

Let us pray: Enable us O God to be like Jesus, living our lives for the sake of the world, for the building up of the community, for the common good. Be at work in us that we might claim a divine humility with the same mind that was in Christ Jesus, in whose name we pray. Amen.