**Teaching on Humility**

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Texts:

Proverbs 25:6-7  
 Luke 14:1, 7-14

Here is the [Zoom link](https://us02web.zoom.us/rec/play/v-xBl8nd4bsOTF7bpEstX6FPELwUbs66_38HDfTol8HgFfS9SGCQ6RLnGRLXxx348dp_uBb4eGsReRgg.ZCd5BEKQazNys0SW) to Wendy’s teaching.  Note that a minute or two into the teaching the Zoom audio stops.  It takes a minute or two, but Kevin does get it fixed so stay with it.

When I mentioned to my husband David that I would be working on my teaching for this Sunday, he asked what the topic was. When I said, “humility,” he responded, “I presume you will be using me as a prime example.” David has been known to comment on more than one occasion, “Humility is my greatest asset.” I might argue with this statement, but, on the other hand, if I were to sum up in one sentence the gist of this sermon, I’d say that “humility is knowing oneself.” David is a person who is not shy about his assets or his foibles, is very down-to-earth in many ways, and has a dry sense of humor. Humility, down-to-earthiness (humus), and humor all come from the same root. So perhaps he is my prime example of humility! What I do know is that being David’s wife is a humbling experience for me. I suppose being married is a humbling experience for most people, because you can’t really maintain a close relationship for a long time without finding out about your own foibles and defects of character — as well as those of your partner.

When Sito asked if I could take this Sunday, I was lukewarm about the lectionary scriptures — but eventually noticed a word “humble” and resigned myself to talking about humility. The dilemma here, is that humility is NOT one of *my* greatest assets — in contrast to my husband. How can I teach on humility when I’m not really a humble person? Well, I suppose I can preach to myself — so bear in mind, that’s what I’m doing today.

Proverbs 25: 6-7 says,

Do not exalt yourself in the king’s presence,  
 and do not claim a place among his great men;  
It is better for him to say to you, “Come up here,”  
 than for him to humiliate you before his nobles.

Jesus, in *Luke 14* is at table with the Pharisees who are watching him closely — presumably to catch him doing something against the law, like healing on the Sabbath. Jesus, however, is watching *them* and the guests, and catches them vying for the places of honor. He tells them, with the Proverbs passage in mind, I think, not to sit in the best seats because you might be embarrassed and made to sit in the lowest seat. He ends by saying, “For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.” (NIV) The Message translates the last line as, “If you walk around all high and mighty, you’re going to end up flat on your face. But if you’re content to be simply yourself, you will become more than yourself.”

I liked this fresh way of phrasing it, because it fits with my overall thinking about becoming humble — becoming more oneself, more authentic in one’s being, in short, more “human.” The dictionary definition of humility is rather short (and shallow, I might add): “freedom from pride or arrogance.” A much more profound definition of humility was offered by Dee Taylor last week: it is “seeing Christ in the other,” and when we do see Christ in the other, she pointed out, how that changes our perspective and our ability to dialogue with one another.

The opposite of being humble is “exalting yourself” as Jesus noted in the passage above. Some other antonyms for humility are arrogance, egotism, presumptuousness, pretense, pridefulness, and superiority. (By the way, there was list of 24 opposites to humility in the dictionary and only 6 synonyms — which perhaps says something about how many ways we engage in NOT being humble!) All these opposites are ways we feel superior to or better than others. They also denote inauthenticity, being higher up (not earthy), and self-centeredness. They are the opposite of knowing your place in the universe, in the community, in the human family. Anyone who has seen the pictures of the universe coming back from outer space cannot help but meditate on the mystery and wonder — the awesomeness of creation — and as a result feel one’s insignificance in the scheme of things. At the same time, paradoxically, to be humble is to know oneself as at home in the universe and at home in the human family.

I remember vividly as a 9- or 10-year-old standing under a Norway Maple tree in the later fall when the leaves on the entire enormous tree had turned pure yellow. With the sun shining fully through the leaves, it was like standing enveloped in a giant glowing golden lantern. I remember the feeling of tremendous awe and wonder in that moment — I believe a sense of what it means to be very tiny, but at home in the universe, a part of everything. Can you imagine what it would be like if every child had the opportunity to experience the awesomeness of nature. Perhaps if that were the case, we wouldn’t be on the brink of the destruction of the Earth now.

Lawrence Taylor’s sermon last week elucidated how important listening is to make it possible for dialogue to happen across differences. As a therapist, sometimes I’m told, “You’re not listening to me.” Which means, “You aren’t really understanding me.” I need to humble myself before my clients and really listen to them. My opinions get in the way of humility sometimes. I know this, but it still sometimes happens. I feel sure that a client will benefit greatly from participating in a group because of the support one gets from sharing similar burdens and stories. But if a client is not ready for the experience, it won’t work. They will be too frightened or feel insecure and unaccepted in the group even by well-meaning participants. I must humbly wait until the person is ready to receive the love and caring from others. My opinion can be right as rain, but if the person isn’t ready, it’s not right for them.

As therapists, our counselees give us a gift — the gift of honest reflection on how we listen, how we are BEING with them. That is truly an opportunity for learning humility, for which I am deeply grateful.

By the way, do you know how many therapists it takes to change a light bulb? Well, only one, but the light bulb has to want to change! — Truthfully, no one can change another person (unlike light bulbs)…

Feeling “superior” is the opposite of humility. White Supremacy and White Superiority are the opposite of humility. White privilege assumes we deserve privileges over others. White Superiority assumes we know better, our way of doing things is better, our opinions are more accurate than those who are different from us, and that we deserve to have power over others who are not white.

In Jesus day, as in ours, there was a distinct order in society, with the rich and powerful at the top, successive layers of privilege underneath, and the poor, outcast and despised at the bottom. In the passage we read today, Jesus is saying essentially, “Let’s do away with the hierarchy of place all together. There isn’t a special place for me at the top and a right place for you at the bottom. Let’s all sit around the table as equals.” That was pretty radical then, and it still is!

Internalized racial oppression is also not humility. Just as a child internalizes the criticism or negative labelling from parents, elders and teachers automatically – often carrying this sense of unworthiness into adulthood — so do BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color) folks often internalize and carry the White Supremacist society’s structures and messages into their own being, not recognizing their own intrinsic worth and beauty. In this way a false humility, a false understanding of who you are is forced upon a child or a BIPOC in our society.

A Black woman client told me a story of when she was in 4th grade and noticed that her White teacher had misspelled a word on the blackboard. She proudly pointed that out (spelling being one of her favorite subjects) and noticed the teacher’s irritated expression as she corrected the misspelled word. She was given the cold shoulder by that teacher for the rest of her time in that class. She was told by her parents, “Never correct a white person.” Can you imagine how this impacts a child who is just learning who she is and what her strengths are — to be ignored and treated with contempt after demonstrating her gift?

Whites must humbly seek to overcome our automatic false internalized white superiority, which is in the air we breathe, in order to find our right place at the table. BIPOC must seek to overcome the discrimination and false internalized oppression created by the White Supremacist society we all live in, to find *their* right place at the table of community and society. Wherever we find ourselves in this hierarchical system of racism, we all have this good work to do, and it can be hard work. Humility is being willing to do this work!

It seems like it’s almost easier to talk about what humility is NOT than what it IS.

It is NOT groveling or being a doormat to others. In my experience in the Bruderhof, there was a lot of focus on sin and purity — ferreting out the former to get to the latter. However, in the book *Spirituality of Imperfection* by Ernest Kurtz and Katherine Ketcham, based on the principles of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), the authors point out that we are *both* “angels and beasts.” Being human means to be flawed. Becoming more human, as Lawrence counseled us last week, is to accept our flaws as well as our strengths.

Instead of getting rid of “sin” or “defects of character” as AA would have it, we recognize that we are “all of the above” — both angel and beast. When we do a realistic assessment and accept our own flaws and foibles, we will become more accepting of the flaws and foibles of others. As Dee said, we’ll be able to see Christ in others as well as ourselves. We will be fully *human* beings.

Quote from the book *The Spirituality of Imperfection*:

The saints and the sages insist that imperfections be accepted as imperfections because such acceptance is necessary if we are to develop a vision of life and a way of living in which those imperfections can be endured and lived with creatively. And so the “second step” along that way involves accepting the uncertainties of life, refraining from asking for absolute assurances, and abandoning demands for perfection. P.46

A story about the founding of AA referred to in the book is how early on the ideals for recovering alcoholics were, “Absolute honesty, absolute purity, absolute unselfishness and absolute love.” However, as Bill Wilson, co-founder of AA realized,

…when you put ‘absolute’ before [the ideals of honesty, purity, unselfishness and love] we found that alcoholics just couldn’t stand the pace, and too many went out and got drunk again….we saw people going broke on this sort of perfection – trying to get too good by Thursday.

The word “perfect” in the verse from Matthew 5:48 which says, “be perfect as your Heavenly Father is perfect” is translated from the Greek “telios” which means “fully complete.” In context of the passage, to be “fully complete” we are admonished to be compassionate and treat everyone fairly. To be humble is not to strive for “purity” — as I was raised to believe — but rather to live in solidarity *with* and compassion *for* others. In fact Jesus himself railed against the “purity laws” of his time and acted against their conventions by eating with “sinners” and doing a variety of things which offended the purists of his day.

In founding AA, Bill Wilson (with others) made a list of defects of character, (rather than “sins”) and pride was at the top of the list. In the book the authors of *The Spirituality of Imperfection* talk about how we need community, and specifically we need a community of broken persons. The book talks about William James, who wrote *The Varieties of Religious Experience* which strongly influenced the early founders of AA.

James describes individuals who

are haunted by a deep sense of the risk, danger, and pervasive moral evil that runs through the world. Conscious of possessing a self that is somehow divided, these sick souls are examples par excellence of “the constitutional disease” James calls *Zerrissenheit* (“torn-to-pieces-hood”).” P.60.

Alcoholics need other alcoholics so they can feel they have something to give back. This is their source of hope. By saying, “I need you,” they are saying, “You have something to give me.” This is the basis of L’Arche as well.

A quote from L’Arche’s founder Vanier referring to a core member:

Because he is so broken, in some way we can allow him to reveal to us our brokenness without getting angry…. He is so broken that I am allowed to look at my own brokenness without being ashamed. P.85

When we tell our stories in community, with the brokenness and defects of character as well as the triumphs and gifts we have received, a mutuality and trust is established. It becomes safe to be imperfect and to share our hurts and broken parts. A humble heart and listening stance make this possible.

A story in the book related a plea from a nursing home resident who said:

…most people here…they just want to tell their story. That’s what they have to give, don’t you see? And it’s a precious thing to them. It’s their life they want to give. You’d think people would understand what it means to us…to give our lives in a story….Most of what goes on here is people listening to each other’s stories. P. 96

Mutual storytelling builds community. It is important for us as humans to give our life in a story, to create ourselves as we tell our story, and to create the bonds which hold community together.

Now I’ve talked about what humility is and isn’t, I’d like to end my teaching today with some ways we can practice humility.

The first, of course, is to *embrace our brokenness*: to accept ourselves as both angel and beast, to acknowledge we need each other in our Zerrissenheit, to affirm the mix-up-ed-ness of our humanity, as Kurtz and Ketcham put it. One way we do this in our mission group is by having an honest accounting of how we practiced our disciplines each week, including our failures and challenges.

The second is equally important: to *discover, evoke and embrace our giftedness.*  Psalm 112 says, “Happy the one who fears God. That person is gracious, compassionate…a beacon in darkness…” This takes us to the other side of humility, recognizing who we are, being at home where we are, and fully giving the gift of who we are. I have never felt I wanted to be a professional artist, but in my old age, I know now that I am most myself when I am expressing myself through art and helping others create beauty in and for themselves. When you find that passionate core of yourself, you come home to yourself. It is a balance of the Zerrissenheit and the giftedness, angel and beast — not perfect, mind you, but a sense of balance and rightness of place.

You are not in competition with others, but in sync with self and others. You know who you are, how God is expressed within you, and you appreciate how God is expressed in others.

This brings us to the third way we can practice humility, which was pointed out to us last week by Dee Taylor: *seeing Christ in the other*. We can help each other shine like a beacon in the darkness by listening deeply without judgement to the other, and by *helping to evoke the gifts of the other*. We do this in our small mission groups and sometimes other ways. No one should be left out of this sacred process! Perhaps there are other times and places we can encourage gift evoking, as I believe it is an essential practice of the Church of the Saviour and 8th Day FC.

A fourth way of humility is something I think most in this community already do: *identifying with the oppressed and those who suffer***.** Hebrews 13:2-8 says,

”Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers….Continue to remember those in prison as if you were together with them in prison, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering.”

There will no longer be a hierarchy at the table if we sit with those on the fringes of society, if we choose to walk in their shoes and understand life from that perspective.

A fifth way of humility is related to the fourth: *recognizing and combatting racism in ourselves, our community, our society***.** For us Whites, we need to humbly learn about and acknowledge our history of White Supremacy in this country and how it is still affecting how we act and how our institutions are structured to cause the oppression of BIPOC that’s still endemic. As we learn about this, we must become anti-racist or betray our true selves. This can be a humbling process.

For BIPOC folks, the work is recognizing how racism has been internalized, causing a false humility in some, and how it affects everyday life in so many ways. Finding true power in oneself and one’s community is the result of this process of combatting racism. Perhaps “humility” and “power” sound like opposites, but they aren’t! We are all called to use our power at the point of our gifts, in community, to bring about God’s justice in the world. For us Whites, finding a place of lesser power so BIPOC can come into their power is a path to humility.

Finally, as a 6th path to humility, I believe we should regularly continue *the practice of telling our stories* and listening deeply to one another. This is a sacred practice and tradition of Church of the Saviour that we need to keep. As the nursing home resident expressed it, to be fully human — and humble in the best sense of the word — we need to “give our life in a story.” This joins us as broken and healed people.

To close, I quote the authors of *The Spirituality of Imperfection:*

Spirituality flourishes in discovery, and especially in the discovery of shared story — the discovery that creates community. For community is where we can learn and practice storytelling and its virtues, humility and obedience — two painfully misunderstood qualities that are really the arts of listening. Humility involves the refusal to coerce, the rejection of all attempts to control others; real listening may be the most humanizing act of humility.” P. 95.