

The Reverend Dr. Randall K. Bush
East Liberty Presbyterian Church
June 3, 2012
“Humility”
John 3:22-30

Read the scripture online: NSRV, <http://bible.oremus.org/?ql=206606784>

Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount begins with the familiar words of the Beatitudes: *Blessed are the poor, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.* And then the one that is always a bit troubling to our modern, self-confident ears: *Blessed are the meek, the humble, for they shall inherit the earth.* The virtue of humility always lacks a certain crowd appeal. You’d never write on a job application: “Hire me because I’m so humble.” The philosopher Frederick Nietzsche argued that no matter how many authors write volumes praising humility, they all make sure that their names are printed boldly on the title page.

Some are quick to falsely assume that to be humble means that we let others take advantage of us, that we sit quietly and never move a finger in our own defense. Some believe that being humble means playing the role of the “silent sufferer.” Garrison Keillor tells the story of the son calling his mother long-distance:

Son: Hi, Mom, How’s everything in Florida?

Mom: Not too good. I’ve been very weak.

Son: Why are you weak?

Mother: Never mind.

Son: What’s wrong? Why are you weak, Mom?

Mom: It’s okay. It’s just that I haven’t eaten in 38 days.

Son: That’s terrible. Why haven’t you eaten in 38 days?

Mom: Because I didn’t want my mouth to be filled with food if you should call.

“Blessed are the meek, the humble, for they shall inherit the earth.” There is something positive about this virtue, but to find it, we have to dig deep within ourselves. This is not a surface-level virtue, a superficial quality that you can turn on and off like a moral light switch. This is something deeper, and thus quite important. Let’s look at this topic first from the wisdom of Eastern religion and then from the surprising example of humility taught by the fiery prophet John the Baptist.

Eastern religions like Buddhism and Taoism correctly place a tremendous value on taming our excesses of emotion and learning how to quiet the soul. They have a great saying for when you can’t focus on anything: “monkey mind.” Your mind races from thought to thought, jumping and swinging from loose neurons like howler monkeys from vines.¹ Only by quieting our monkey minds, by emptying our consciousness and souls of excess clutter, can we find a quiet place in which to best heed the spiritual voice of the Lord. The *Tao Te Ching*, the ancient writings of Taoism, reminds us that while clay can be shaped into a vessel, it is the empty space within that makes it useful. Humility arises from having empty space within us in which something other than our immediate



wants and needs can live and move and have its being. Norman Vincent Peale years ago said, "Humble people don't think less of themselves; they just think about themselves less."

Here is where the example of John the Baptist becomes instructive. The role of John the Baptist was to call people to lives of repentance and right relationship with God as he waited for the opportunity to announce the coming Messiah. He was consistently "other-focused," pointing away from himself and pointing toward God and in the fullness of time pointing to Jesus the Messiah, the Lamb of God, whom John baptized in the waters of the Jordan River. John would humbly and faithfully say, "I am not the Christ; the One who comes after me truly ranks ahead of me; I am not worthy to untie his sandals." That was true in John 1 when we first read of Jesus and John; it is also true in John 3, when it turns out that both are preaching and baptizing people in the Judean countryside.

When John is asked by some of his followers about this new rabbi in the neighborhood, John gives his testimony about Christ again, saying, "I am not the Messiah; I have only been sent ahead of him." Then he uses a wonderful illustration for this, saying "Jesus is the bridegroom; I am merely the friend of the groom, the best man." Now weddings were a bit different in Jesus' time than they are today. Much of the responsibility for preparing for the wedding fell on the groom's family, not the bride's. And the one who did the bulk of the work for the groom was his best man. He would make all the arrangements, working diligently until the groom was escorted into the presence of the bride. From that moment on, the best man would slip more and more from a place of prominence into a supporting role as the focus now centered on the bridal couple.

Out of that spirit, John humbly said, "He must increase, but I must decrease." It is like the waxing and waning of the moon: Jesus' influence was growing day by day, while John the Baptist's was waning, growing dimmer as a necessary result of Jesus' presence in the world. As an interesting bit of religious trivia, one of the reasons the early church picked December 25th as Jesus' birthday is because it was the Winter Solstice, the time each year when the days thereafter grow longer, and more light comes into the world each day. By contrast, the early church decreed that John the Baptist's birthday should be celebrated on June 24th, a time near the Summer Solstice, when the light is already at its brightest so that each day thereafter is a bit shorter and generates a bit less light.

John the Baptist's spirit of humility is behind the comment, "He must increase while I must decrease." It is not a matter of "silent suffering" or "self-hatred" by any means. It is simply a matter of Jesus and John having very different roles. As St. Augustine described it in one of his ancient commentaries, he has John saying, "I listen; he is the one who speaks. I am the ear; he is the word. I am enlightened; he is the light."

Humble faith involves quieting our anxious souls and our "monkey minds" long enough to be attuned to the voice of God. Humble faith needs an empty space within, like the



interior space of a clay vessel, so that God's Spirit can abide in us and fill us. You can nurture this by just sitting still for a while, unplugging from the electronic umbilical cords attached to so many of us (me included). You can also do this by just remembering how to breathe, how to look around and notice things, how to communicate without words, how to be for once, instead of always doing.

Humble faith daily remembers that "it's not all about us"; that cycles of waxing and waning are built into the seasons of life. It remembers that necessarily there are times when we must decrease so that someone else may increase; when we must step back from leadership or directing or being in charge so that someone else can use their God-given gifts for a while.

And when humility is truly, faithfully present, it is a joyful thing. John himself said, *For this reason my joy has been fulfilled* (John 3:29). Moments of humility, of quiet and other-focus can be times of great joy. For then our lives are understood most clearly in relation to God in Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit and that is a joy-evoking thing.

Henri Nouwen, in one of his diaries, made this comment: *I will see when I am willing to be seen. I will receive new eyes that can see the mysteries of God's own life when I allow God to see me, all of me, even those parts that I myself do not want to see. O Lord, see me and let me see.*²

Humility is when we are willing to be fully seen by God. It is when we move from our places of pre-eminence and gather at Christ's table to receive from him a very part of his being, his love, his sacrifice. It is when we quiet our spirits to allow the Holy Spirit to dwell within and direct our hearts and minds. To do that is to inherit the fullness of the earth and the very promise of heaven. And that is our hope and our greatest joy. Thanks be to God.

AMEN

¹ Cf. "Monkey Mind: A Memoir of Anxiety" by Daniel Smith; *New York Times Magazine*, April 20, 2012.

² Henri Nouwen, *The Road to Daybreak*, 1997, p. 18.

