***HUMBLE OR HUMBLED?***

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May 24, 2020

Texts: 1 Peter 5:5-11 and Luke 14:7-11

The message appeared in the inbox of my email this week with the heading: *From humble beginnings…* It was part of a fundraising campaign for WMRA, the local public radio station, and the message chronicled the history of the station from its birth 45 years ago as a self-described “*scrappy rural radio station*” to its present position as *a regional news service* broadcasting to 20 counties in Virginia. Our story here at Covenant could be described in similar terms with our *humble beginnings* in an auto body shop on Augusta Street where 124 scrappy charter members formed a new church that has grown into this Covenant community of over 450 members. The *humble beginnings* of our nation are rooted in thirteen scrappy colonies and a Declaration of Independence. Pandemics too have *humble beginnings;* for COVID-19 they seem to be in a wet market in Wuhan, China while the *humble beginnings* of the Spanish flu of 1918 were not in Spain, but in Kansas. These stories sound like variations on a parable Jesus told about a mustard seed: from humble beginnings come big things!

Perhaps that is why so many politicians cite their humble beginnings as the foundation for their life stories, hoping that voters will remember the parable and conclude that great things must be in store. Yet somewhere along the line, the humility of those humble beginnings is often lost. What begins in humility is eaten up by hubris; humble beginnings offer a great starting place for many a life story, but few want their stories to conclude with a humble ending. Very few would echo the words of Pope John XXIII: “*Born poor, but of honored and humble people, I am particularly proud to die poor*.” Or share the sentiments of S.J. Perlman: “*Look at me – worked myself up from nothing to a state of extreme poverty!*” Humility is supposed to be a virtue, but all too often in our society it is regarded as a weakness. So instead of humble admissions, we get Mac Davis singing, *O Lord its hard to be humble when you’re perfect in every way!* and hear the paradoxical boast: “*Of my many outstanding qualities, humility is my best.*”

In his advice to the Pharisees with whom he was dining, Jesus encourages humility and warns against arrogance that presumes a place of honor. *When you arrive, sit at the lowest place, so that your host may invite you to move up higher rather than taking a seat of honor and risk being asked to move down*, he tells them. In other words, humble yourself rather than risk being humbled. “*For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted*”. It is far better to be humble than to be humbled!

Dale Shughart was the president of Dickinson Law School when I was there from 1979-1982. He was also a president judge in the county and a towering figure in the community. A few years before I arrived, a young commissioner named Jake Myers decided to confront the judge over his request for a pay increase for his staff. In doing so Jake hoped to save the taxpayers some money and make clear to the judge who was in charge. Having announced his intention to the assistant county solicitor, Jake marched off to confront the judge. He took the elevator up to the judge’s chambers and was back in five minutes. “How did you make out?” asked the solicitor. “I gave him the money for the raises,” said Jake. “Did he have valid reasons for them?” asked the solicitor. “I didn’t ask,” said Jake.[[1]](#endnote-1) It is better to be humble than to be humbled!

In his letter to the young churches in Asia Minor Peter urges them to practice humility in their daily lives and in their life together. “*Clothe yourselves with humility in your dealings with one another*,” he writes. Wear humility as a garment that is present in all your relationships with one another. Then echoing Jesus’ parable he urges, “*Humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, so that God may exalt you in due time*.” In due time – humility demands of us patience, which is not often our greatest strength! There are some things you might like God to teach you, like how to be faithful. But there are some things you really ***don’t*** want God to teach you, things you just want God to ***give*** you because learning the lessons can be so painful. Do you really want God to teach you patience when that lesson in patience is really hard? Or do you want God to ***give*** you patience? Humility is another value we would rather be given than have to learn the hard way. Give me humility, Lord. Don’t teach me humility or humble me. Just give me humility and I will humble myself as you ask!

What does such humility look like? Frederick Buechner puts it this way:

*Humility is often confused with the gentlemanly self-deprecation of saying you’re not much of a bridge player when you know perfectly well you are….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]](#endnote-2)

Humility does not need to judge others as better or worse. It can rejoice with those who rejoice and suffer with those who suffer. It recognizes that we all are created in the image of God. None of us has all the answers. One of my seminary professors, Paul Achtemeier, was a world-renowned New Testament scholar, but he said that he still learned new things each year from the students in his classes. That is humility! Yet we all know those who, due to pride or insecurity, lack any humility and try to convince the world that they know it all and never admit a mistake. Some even proclaim themselves geniuses, while others are holier than God, at least in their own eyes! And it is just a matter of time until they are humbled!

In the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* this week there was an Op-Ed piece by Nicholas Kristof entitled, “*The Coronavirus is still a mystery*”. The gist of his argument is that there is still much that we do not know about the virus: how it works and how the body responds to it, and so we would be wise to approach it with humility and a dose of caution before making any bold assertions. Yet that rarely seems to be the case these days. He writes:

*The odd thing about reporting on the coronavirus is that the nonexperts are supremely confident in their predictions, while epidemiologists keep telling me that they don’t really know much at all…. Some of that epidemiological humility should seep into public discourse*.[[3]](#endnote-3)

Kristof’s words remind me of the adage: *the older and wiser you get the more you know that you don’t know*. Perhaps that epidemiological humility should seep into all our discourse – public and private alike! That is certainly what Peter is urging the churches in regard to their relationships with one another and with God when he writes, “Clothe yourselves with humility.” Humility in our relationships with friends, strangers, and foes alike might result in less division, less vitriol, less polarization – in the first century church and among us in these pandemic times and beyond. It might temper leaders who make bold unfounded claims about the virus and possible remedies with far more certainty than the science indicates. As many of you know, our daughter-in-law is an epidemiologist with the CDC and has made us aware of the humility with which doctors like Anthony Fauci and Deborah Birx must approach their work; epidemiologists understand that if they do not humble themselves in approaching this virus, the virus is likely to humble them! There is no simplistic solution. Perhaps if we all approach this pandemic with a little more humility and a lot more patience the virus will be less likely to humble us!

Such humility should foster respect, but not fear. Peter finds it necessary to reassure the churches on that count. “Cast all your anxiety on God,” he writes, “because God cares for you.” He knows that the people are suffering and anxious; so he reassures them that God’s hand is at work in their midst. The God who created us and gave us the breath of life has not abandoned us for greener pastures, but is near to us, to comfort and support us, to guide and inspire us, and when necessary, to humble and correct us. If it sounds a lot like the role of a parent, then you understand why that image of God as parent is so often used by Jesus.

God knows that we have fears, so God says, “I am with you.” God knows that a host of temptations lure us into sinful behaviors - *envy* makes us covet our neighbor’s house and donkey, *arrogance* makes us sinfully proud, *greed* leads us to love the wrong things, *sloth* finds expression in laziness or procrastination, *prejudice* entices abuse of others, *pride* keeps us from admitting we might be wrong. The list goes on and on. And so God says again and again, “I forgive you.” To humble ourselves is to admit that we need God to be with us, to help us resist those temptations, and to save us from ourselves. That is why we begin worship each week with confession, humbling ourselves and laying before God the errors of our hearts and ways, asking God to forgive and redeem us because we cannot do it ourselves. “*The God of all grace will restore, support, strengthen, and establish you*,” writes Peter. That is what God does!

In the midst of this pandemic we want God do that NOW, to support us – yes!, to strengthen us – yes! but especially to restore us – NOW! We are anxious to get back to doing what we do in the way we are accustomed to doing it – especially when the sun is shining, the weather is warm, and there is so much economic hardship about. We are tired of this pandemic pain! But if we do not humble ourselves with a little epidemiological humility, then we will be humbled! “Discipline yourselves,” writes Peter. Exercise some self-control, be clear-headed. Keep alert. If we clothe ourselves with humility and exercise some self-control as Peter suggests, then maybe we can be a bit more patient through this trying time, trusting that God is at work in our midst and will indeed restore us in time and will make that path to being restored clear. Perhaps in clothing ourselves in humility these days, we may avoid being humbled – by the virus, or by God! Amen

1. Told by Bill Costopoulos in *The Dickinson Lawyer* [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC*, Harper & Row:1973, p.40 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Nicholas Kristof, “The Coronavirus is still a mystery: Respond to it with humility, and apprehension, too”, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, May 22, 2020, p.A-11 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)