

Do Unto Others #3: “Humility”

Ephesians 4:1-6

Sunday, September 15, 2024

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If you have even been remotely paying attention to the news last week, you know that this sermon series on the Golden Rule is perhaps not only timely, but urgent. As one seminary professor observes, “Jesus didn’t say how to vote. But he did say how we should treat each other.”¹ We are moving further and further away from “doing unto others as you would have them do unto you,” and ever closer to a version expressed in a cartoon featuring a senior executive talking to a subordinate. “Remember,” the CEO says, “we follow the Golden Rule here: do unto others so severely there is no way they can do it unto you.”

Or, as another person quipped, “Before you criticize someone, make sure you walk a mile in their shoes. That way, when you do criticize them, you’re a mile away from them and you’re wearing their shoes.”

Paul would remind us that the Christian life is grounded in humility, or the ability to see our common humanity.

As you probably know, there was a contest this week that put humility to the test. Two bitter rivals met for a 90-minute battle. It was a hard-fought battle of wills, with each side snarling and clawing at the other. Surrogate cheerleaders had spent the days before gaining up to each competitor’s fans, all of it leading up to this battle to see who was stronger, more capable. We watched and waited to see who would emerge as the victor, but even when it was over it still was not finished.

Each side fought hard, pushing against the other’s vulnerabilities and weaknesses, but in the end a victor emerged. This was a battle for the ages, and there is no way I can remain non-partisan about the outcome. I am speaking, of course, of a high school football game in Southern California Friday night when crosstown rivals Bonita High School of La Verne, CA took on the San Dimas High School Saints in the annual Smudge Pot bowl. Bonita High School is famous, of course, for being

¹ Curtis Chang, “Moving People Toward Greater Hope and Humility Across Political Differences,” www.faithandleadership.com

across the street from the church that was the location for the wedding in the classic movie “The Graduate,” and for also being my alma mater.

What? You didn’t see that coming? The Smudge Pot bowl is one of California’s most storied high school football contests. It has been taking place every year since 1972, when the Saints bested the Bonita Bearcats 33-0. But my Bearcats have fought back over the years, including my senior year when we routed the Saints 23 to zip. On Friday night, the Smudge Pot returned to his rightful home at Bonita High School following a 47-7 victory which included 14 of 17 pass completions for 333 yards.

We’ll now take a moment to stand and sing “Alma Mater, Hail To Thee!”

“O Lord, it’s hard to be humble,” sang Mac Davis in 1974, when you’re perfect in every way...Oh, Lord, it’s hard to be humble, but we’re doing the best that we can.”

In Ephesians, Paul seeks to cultivate a sense of spiritual maturity within the church. He pleads for the church to seek a unity that leads to a sense of wholeness. It is a call to grow up, to set aside immature preoccupations that tear the church and world apart. Instead, says Paul, we are invited to grow up into what verse 13 calls “the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ.”

We are called to cultivate humility. Ruben Rosario Rodriguez, a Presbyterian who teaches theology at Saint Louis University is a Latino scholar of John Calvin who teaches at a Catholic university. Now there is a challenge! Ruben reminds us that while “humble” is hardly a word many people associate with John Calvin, one of Calvin’s lasting contributions to the church was his insistence that Christ calls the church to stand against evil in our society. Calvin called the church of his day to speak out against injustices toward immigrants and the poor. Ruben tells us Calvin offers the church the reminder that God is to be at work in our civil government so that “humanity may be maintained among (all people).”

This is the word Paul gives to the church. God is calling us to pursue the gifts that Christ has lavished on the church—a unity Paul expresses as “one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one ‘God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.”

Here is what is at stake: when we lose sight of humility, we diminish our capability to rely on awe and wonder. We lose sight of the perspective of Christ, and close ourselves to the leading of God. Graham Standish writes that “humility is a way of life in which we become consumed with seeking God’s direction rather than purely living according to our instincts.”²

We do not speak of humility much.

Think of the moments you most associate with learning humility in your life: for me it was turning in my first written assignment in seminary, a short, three-page essay which was returned to me with a much lower grade than I believed I deserved and what seemed to be three pages of handwritten comments. Humility was the moment that I learned, as the father of three young daughters, that I would never, ever, get the Saturday morning donut order right, and that my only hope was packing all three girls into the car and taking them to the donut shop. I learned the lesson of humility a few weeks into serving my first church when I introduced all the graduating high school seniors during worship – only to forget one. And she was the only Black student in the church.

We may see humility as a virtuous activity, but we nearly always associate it with weakness, loss, or vulnerability. We may see it as a good a virtuous activity, but one that is seldom effective in the real world. Instead, we align ourselves with the narrative that humility is a sign of weakness. We believe that the Golden Rule only makes sense if the rules are made by those who have all the gold.

Paul counters this argument with a thundering response in chapter four of Ephesians. The chapter is a hinge point in his epistle, and it begins with this strong declaration: “Therefore!” Here is the most important word. Paul grounds our calling to humility in the knowledge of what Christ has done for us. He sees this as an ongoing, organic process of growth – not something that we have initially perfected, but something that grows as we allow God’s love to grow in us. Humility means changing our perspectives.

² Standish, <https://alban.org/archive/humble-leadership/>

Writer and activist Shane Claiborne says that when he is asked to list his vocation, he has begun listing “lover.” “That’s what I’m striving for,” says Claiborne, “to love God and love people...now my profession is listed as ‘lover.’”

To love others is to widen our sense of awe and to ground ourselves in gratitude. When he was in graduate school, Claiborne and a friend were motivated to learn as much about serving others as possible. What better way, they thought, to learn about serving others than to travel to Calcutta, India to work with Mother Theresa. They wrote her a letter, explaining their hope to come and learn from her. Claiborne said they mailed the letter...and waited...and waited.

He admits he is not the most patient person. After a few weeks of waiting, he began making calls to see if he could get a number for Mother Teresa’s convent in India. Finally, he found a number. He figured out the time difference and placed a call at around 2 a.m. from a pay phone in his dorm. The phone rang...and rang...and rang...and then someone answered. It was not a formal, “Missionaries of Charity, how may I help you?” but a raspy voice. “Hullo?” Thinking he had the wrong number, Claiborne spilled out his story, mindful the call was costing him \$4 a minute. The voice on the other end said, “This is the Missionaries of Charity. This is Mother Teresa.” Claiborne writes that is nearly replied, “Yeah, and I’m the pope.” She listened to his request, and simply said, “Sure, come.” Instead of simply saying thank you, he pressed her for details: where would they sleep? Where would they eat?” Mother Teresa remained humble and focused: “God takes care of the lilies, and the sparrows, and God will take care of you. Just come.”

Humility leads us to a deeper awareness of God’s provisions. And yet, we cling to the narrative that unless we are successful, strong, and in charge, we are not doing what God wants. Instead, Paul suggests that we just come, and walk in the manner Christ has called us.