

“Finding the Humble Path”
October 1, 2023
Scripture: Philippians 2:1-13; Matthew 21:23-32

That reading from Philippians has been a favorite of mine for a long, long time. But my affection for it has changed over the years. I used to focus mainly on the hymn to Christ that Paul quotes. I love that description of Jesus who empties himself of power, the Greek word is *kenosis*, and takes on the role of a slave. In this poem Jesus embodies the spirit of humility.

That’s a far cry from the Church’s usual portrayal of Jesus as a conquering hero. Language like this in Philippians is a needed corrective to the triumphalist language we like to use when we talk about Jesus and by extension our religion. I’ve read that depictions of Jesus in the artwork of early Christians tend to portray him as caring and humble. But after the 4th century, when Christianity became the religion of the Empire, the artwork changed. Suddenly Jesus is enthroned, holding a globe in one hand, his enemies at his feet. Much of that artwork also depicts Jews and Muslims as servants to Christianity. Those the Church has deemed unworthy now take on the form of slaves, but not Christ.

That’s a massive shift that we too often ignore. Our image of Jesus is shaped by our self-image. As our power over the events of the world grows, our depictions of Jesus as all-powerful become more common. Paul seems to think that influence should go the other direction. Jesus should be shaping us instead of us shaping him. That’s why I’ve become more interested in the earlier part of this reading.

The people in the Philippian church are encouraged to live together within a framework of humility. “Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit,” Paul tells them, “but in humility regard others as better than yourselves.” That’s a standard our society has very little respect for. It feels too weak. We’re told in a thousand ways every day to assert ourselves, to get what’s ours, to win. You can’t do that if you consider others better than yourself. So, I find the real challenge in this passage lies in applying this description of community to our lives today. How do we find the humble path Paul is advocating?

The opposite of humility, I suppose, is arrogance. Most world religions point to arrogance as the main obstacle preventing us from connecting to the divine. In Judaism the way of Torah requires letting go of self-interest to love God and neighbor. In Buddhism many of the sayings of Buddha, a collection called the Dhammapada, focus on the need to be awakened and give up desires for worldly things. They encourage one to become aware of their connection to all of life and live with empathy and compassion. In Islam, the name itself means “surrender.” One of the five pillars of Islam is care for others in need at the expense of self. So, Paul isn’t teaching something entirely unique. People have always struggled with arrogance as a barrier to knowing God.

I think that’s what Jesus is trying to teach his opponents in this passage from Matthew. The religious leaders in the Temple courtyard come demanding to know where Jesus gets his authority. They want some assurance that he has the right credentials. That’s not too surprising,

really. There must have been many people who claimed to speak for God in a society where there was a lot of religious tension and political uncertainty. I don't think we can fault them for wanting to know where Jesus gets his authority. But they haven't thought it through very well. When Jesus raises the memory of John the Baptist to them, they're caught up short.

Jesus implies that their arrogance prevented them from responding to John's preaching. His parable about the two brothers is his way of contrasting the behavior that flows from humility versus arrogance. This is another of those parables that's been used to promote the belief that Christianity is meant to replace Judaism. Interpreters have allegorized the first brother to be Gentiles and the second to be Jews. But while Jesus is definitely critical of these religious leaders he isn't suggesting they should be eliminated or replaced. He's calling them away from the arrogance of their authority to walk the path of humility and be connected to those they've discounted, like tax collectors and prostitutes. He wants them to be better leaders by becoming more humble.

Paul takes that principle and applies it to the whole community. Suppose we all walked the humble path? What would our life together look like if each of us considers others as better than ourselves? Imagine a world where arrogance is overcome by humility. How do we find the humble path?

Paul points us to the way of Jesus. He encourages us to turn our minds over and become imitators of Christ. In his book *Discovering the Narrow Path*, author and Presbyterian pastor N. Graham Standish describes the way of Christian mystics and the humility they embodied. He writes, "Mystics have a natural humility that is engaging. They laugh at themselves and see themselves as imperfect. In fact, while others around them may praise them for possessing a quality that makes them so naturally spiritual, often they see themselves as weak and inconsequential."

What really jumps out at me in that quote is the capacity of mystics to laugh at themselves. We aren't really encouraged to do that in our society. If we want to be taken seriously we believe we must never admit mistakes, never apologize, and by all means never laugh at ourselves. Yet, that capacity may be the first step on the humble path. By laughing at ourselves we take our mistakes in stride instead of berating ourselves over them. By laughing at ourselves we acknowledge that we're all in the same boat, all struggling to figure out what's most important, all trying to be better versions of ourselves in spite of our weaknesses and failures. When we can laugh at ourselves we realize God doesn't want perfection or absolute obedience, but humility and a sense of humor. As G. K. Chesterton once said, "Angels can fly because they take themselves lightly."

By finding the humble path we can let go of our anxiety over trying to be perfect. We can allow God to guide us and yield ourselves to being led. The way of humility teaches it's not about you. God calls us all to find freedom in humility by letting the mind of Christ dwell in us. Empty your self and be filled with the presence of God so God's love and compassion may flow through you.

Amen