

Where Were You?

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Text: Job 38:1-7,34-41; Mark 10:35-45

Visiting a great cathedral in Europe, a priest was stunned by its sheer magnificence – the dazzling sunlit stained glass windows reaching up toward high vaulted ceilings, the artwork vividly conveying the suffering of Christ, the holy stillness of the place. Overcome with awe, he fell to his knees at the altar and cried out, “O Creator of the Universe, I am nothing! In your sight, I am the least of your creation, mere dust!” A pastor standing nearby caught the spirit and also fell to his knees beside the priest intoning, “O God, I, too, am, nothing; the lowest of the low. All of my life is vanity and a sham! I think so highly of myself, but in your light my spiritual poverty is clear. I am less than dust.” Off to the side, a janitor who was mopping the tile floor observed this, and moved by their humility, he ran to the opposite end of the altar and also fell to his knees, saying, “Yes, Holy Lord, compared to the splendor of your love, my feeble life is nothing. You live forever, and your greatness fills the universe.” At which the pastor elbowed the priest and whispered: “Hey, look who thinks he’s nothing!”

Humility is a dangerous topic on which to speak. I have mused at times about how a psychologist might construct a scale to measure humility. Actually I think it’s pretty simple. You just ask, “On a scale from 0 to 10, with 10 being the highest, how humble are you?” Then to score it, you just reverse the scale!

Perhaps the first thing that Americans associate with the term “humility” is low self-regard. Growing from the 1960s, we have made a national idol of self-esteem. There is an item on a famous psychological test that asks: True or False? “I am an important person.” In the 1950s, only 12% of U.S. respondents answered “True” to this item. Now it’s over 80%. Maybe that’s not such a bad thing, if it represents a recognition of the God-given worth and inherent value of every human being, but I suspect that it is capturing something else. On a good measure of narcissism, American youth now score higher than those in any other nation of the world, and higher than any other age group in America. More than any other time or place, we seem to live in a culture where the defining center of the universe is ME.

Self-centeredness is nothing new, of course. In Mark’s gospel is this story of two of Jesus’ closest disciples – James and John – who by this time had probably been following him for three years. This moment comes literally on the road to Jerusalem. Jesus has just told his disciples that he will be condemned to death, mocked, spat upon, whipped, and killed, and then raised from the dead (Mk 10:33-34). So how do James and John, the beloved disciple, respond? They step forward, within earshot of the other ten, and say, “Teacher, we want you to do whatever we ask of you.” Jesus answers, wisely as always, with a question: “What is it that you want me to do for you?” And what do they ask? “Hey, Jesus, after you’re dead and all and gone to heaven and are all powerful, can we have the best seats right beside you?” The door is wide open for Jesus to rip them up one side and down the other, but he doesn’t shame them. I hear instead the sadness in his voice: “The cup that I drink you will drink . . . but it is not mine to grant you this.”

The other disciples are not so gracious. They are outraged at James and John. Jesus calls them together and says, yet once again, “Whoever wishes to become *great* among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be *first* among you must be slave of all.” (Mk 10:43-44) Don’t put yourself at the head of the table.

Is humility, then, just the opposite of narcissism – low self-esteem, feeling truly worthless? This reminds me of one of my favorite George Carlin quips, that “Most people with low self-esteem earned it.” To be sure, there is value in self-reflective awareness of our own limitations and shortcomings. That is reflected in the Reformed tradition of confession as an important part of our Service for the Lord’s Day. But the purpose of confession, and the desire of our loving Creator, is not to make us feel worthless and unacceptable. Jesus taught that God cares for the flowers and the sparrows, and how much more loves and cares for human beings. If we are loved and cherished by the Maker of the universe, how dare we believe that we are worthless?

So humility is not about feeling worthless. As an aside: Humility cannot be imposed or inspired by humiliation and shaming. I wrote a letter to the *Albuquerque Journal* recently questioning the wisdom of requiring drunk driving offenders to attend Victim Impact Panels. In these panels, sponsored with the best of intentions by Mothers Against Drunk Driving, many DWI offenders are brought together in an auditorium to listen to the personal stories of people who have suffered terrible losses and whose lives have been devastated by someone who was drinking and driving. It is meant to reduce the likelihood that offenders will do it again. Indeed, DWI offenders leaving this presentation usually

feel terrible – ashamed, embarrassed, guilty about what they did. Yet studies show that the panel does absolutely nothing to prevent future offenses. In one UNM study, in fact, offenders were randomly assigned to attend or not attend the panel in addition to all the usual sanctions. First offenders showed no benefit at all, but those who had more than one prior offense were significantly *more* likely to repeat the offenses if they attended the panel. Making people feel bad does not make them behave better.

If humility does not mean actually *feeling* worthless, perhaps it's just pretending, a polite modesty that says *de nada*. "Oh, this old thing?" "Oh, it was nothing." "Don't thank me. The praise belongs to God." This is certainly more gracious than narcissism, than taking credit for more than your due. Yet there is something dismissive, even pretentious about responding in this way. It devalues and deflects what the person is saying to you, and people, let alone God, can see through it. God knows us, knows that we have a natural tendency to love and esteem and protect ourselves. After all, God made us. To "love your neighbor as yourself" takes for granted a love for yourself. True humility is not *pretending* that you are of no value and did nothing good. That is false modesty. If we are loved and cherished by the Maker of the universe, how dare we even pretend to be worthless?

So humility is not either feeling or pretending to be of little value. What then shall we make of God's disturbing reply when Job finally asks why he is suffering? It was not because Job had been bad. Ironically, it was because Job had been uncommonly good that he was chosen for testing – "to be made an example of," in a way that foreshadows the innocent suffering of Jesus. God's answer to Job, out of a whirlwind no less, is that "I am God. I am. Where were you when I created the world? Who are you to question and find fault with me?" Job, as he had done consistently before, recognizes the majesty of God, and humbles himself. I suspect that God's answer was more for the benefit of Job's arrogant friends and for us than for Job himself.

There is an often missed twist at the end of the story of Job. God is not angry with Job, but rather with his friends who had been telling Job that his sin was the cause of his suffering. They misspoke – they had misrepresented the nature of God. And what does Job do, in the midst of terrible suffering on top of which his friends had been shaming him for so long? He does what Jesus did from the cross; he prays for his friends, that God may forgive them their self-righteous ignorance.

So I propose that humility is neither feeling nor pretending to be of no value. Rather it is a three-legged stool. First there is a love and trusting of God above all else, that is to me the heart of faith. This is not shamed worthlessness, but rather a sure knowledge of where our true worth comes from, and to Whom we belong. It is to know our place in God's kingdom, not because we deserve or have earned it, but because we are loved and cherished by the Creator of the Universe who, astonishingly, regards us as family. "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength." That is the opposite of arrogance, and the beginning of humility.

A second leg of the stool follows, and that is gratitude. We are made from dust, and to dust we return. But it is *God* who made us from dust, and who has promised in Jesus to raise us from dust once again in the resurrection of the body. As with Job, we know that all we are and have is from God, who cares and provides for us. Such gratitude is the opposite of greed, of the need to provide abundantly for ourselves rather than sharing with others.

Three legs of humility: Love of God, gratitude, and service. To love your neighbor as yourself. This is the opposite of self-centeredness. We serve not to earn God's love, which we already have, but in recognition and gratitude for God's love. With grateful hearts we become willing to listen, yield, share, and go out of our way, out of our normal routine, to care for others. Through faith and gratitude we know that we have a standard to live up to voluntarily. Our faith presumes an absolute morality – a standard of good and evil that is beyond human judgment, and certainly beyond the modern or post-modern belief that ethics are in the eye of the beholder. Humility includes obedience, and obedience assumes authority. We are called to serve others in love of God, gratitude, and obedient love of our neighbors, who belong all around the great table of our Lord that extends to the farthest reaches of God's earth. That is humility.