

THE POWER IN HUMILITY

Philippians 2: 1-13 (Proverbs 15: 15-33)

"You are too nice! You let her walk all over you!" I was upset. Sally was someone with many gifts. But she was allowing herself to be abused by her sister. It seems this was a pattern she had known all her life. Her sister was only two years older. But early on, Sally had taken the role of being the nice one, allowing her sister to get her way all the time. Her sister could have tantrums, weep, hurl insults. But Sally's role was to be nice, to be quiet and comply with whatever her sister wanted. The sad thing was that being nice only agitated her sister all the more. It's as if being nice was a veneer for a different kind of aggression, a different way of getting power and control. If the goal is to see who can keep their cool and never get angry, then Sally won hands down. Besides this, I suspected that beneath the niceness there was a feeling of contempt for her sister. Being nice was superior. Being angry and impatient was inferior. Sally was better than her sister and both she and her sister felt it. This only created deeper resentment and distance between them.

When I said what I said I was aware of these dynamics. I realized that the reason Sally was so attached to being nice was because it gave her some power over her sister. It was even a little bit of revenge that was in it. "So, you treat me like garbage by insulting me and putting me down? I'll show you! I'll be so nice and even tempered. You will never trigger me and get a rise out of me. I'll be the better person and make you feel guilty and weak for losing control."

But what she told me in response to my words to justify what she did caught me off guard. She said something like this: 'Pastor, I realize that I am letting myself be abused by my sister. But she can't help herself. She has always had difficulty controlling herself. I don't take it personally. Besides, doesn't the bible teach us that we should be humble? that we should make peace where we can? that we should treat others as better than ourselves?' I was taken aback by what she said. She was quoting the bible accurately. But this couldn't be what the bible had in mind with such words. Humility is a central virtue taught in the bible. But humility was not about this at all.

In fact, the more I thought about it, the more I realized that humility can be a dirty word in our society. Even though it describes a positive character trait in successful people who are down to earth, humility can also be seen as weakness rather than strength. To be humble can get you walked all over. Too much humility is akin to passivity, submissiveness, lack of assertiveness. There is no way to get ahead in life by being humble, unless, of course, it's a passive-aggressive tactic like this woman was practicing in relation to her sister. You get the upper hand by getting someone else to feel guilty

for getting upset with you. You make yourself the victim and thereby make the other person feel like the abuser. Many of us have met people or know people who act this way: super-nice, calm and considered all the time. If it doesn't get on our nerves it definitely puts us off. It's not easy dealing with someone like this. We certainly wouldn't want to hold it up as a virtue. We'd rather have someone be who they are, not hide behind a thin veneer of niceness. We'd like someone to be real, even if there are edges to their realness.

So then, how was I to respond to this woman? How was I to respond to the fact that humility is too often a bad word in society, even as it is an important word in the bible?

Well, our reading from Philippians is all about humility. The heart of this passage is what's been called a hymn. In the original Greek the words that in vs. 6 begin: "though he was in the form of God...*os ev morfe theou eparxon*..." are words of poetry, and they have rhythm to them. They must have been written to music, sung during worship. The words tell the story of salvation. There is a descending and ascending movement. Jesus begins in heaven, comes down to earth, and ends up in heaven. But the meaning has everything to do with this word humility. From a place at the top, Jesus descends to the lowest place possible, the lowest place anyone of us can be – in abject humiliation, suffering and a cruel death. But rather than this be a defeat or a descent into disaster, it is a journey that leads through death to a life more glorious than ever.

It's about Christ giving his life for the sake of growing new and richer life. It's about serving, caring and loving. But you know, even though we can respect such acts of generosity and self-expenditure, there is something in us that shrinks from all this, does it not? I mean, the last thing we need is for someone to give up anything for us. We don't want to feel obligated or indebted. And the idea of emptying ourselves, becoming servants, being "obedient", giving up our very lives for others.... All of this smacks of being a carpet for others to walk all over, letting them take advantage of us.

Or is it? What if true, genuine, authentic love, requires humility? And what if humility is the most empowering of virtues. What if the practice of humility builds up our selves on the most solid of foundations? And what if emptying our selves is a process of cleaning out the falseness in us, the distorted basis upon which we have built our sense of self? All of this is exactly what the apostle is talking about. But clearly, he's got a lot of work to do to persuade the Christians of Philippi and us here today.

Let me try to offer something of the apostle's revelatory insight. The apostle says this: "Do nothing from selfish ambition or deceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves." People who are successful in our world have to be ambitious. Being ambitious is about getting yourself to the top. It means being better than others and beating others to the top. And getting there means building the right relationships with the right people and making the right impressions. The apostle recognizes that there is

some deceit here also. We have to tell people what they want to hear so that they like us. We flatter them and pretend to like them or agree with what they think or say because this will get us ahead. Now, even though people like this may seem super confident, powerful and strong, the truth is that such a basis for living successfully is terribly weak. Our whole sense of being, value and worth is so dependent on other people. The power is in others – what they think of us, what they can do for us, how they value us.

In contrast, the apostle points to a very different foundation for a strong self - humility. In humility, we strip ourselves from what others think of us. Others are not there so we can compete with them, but so that we can love them. To regard someone as better than ourselves is not to think of ourselves as inferior, but to develop a vision for seeing the wonderful beauty in others, for all their flaws. To celebrate others for the wonders of who they are and to be fully content in who I am with all my limitations and flaws... this is true power, true freedom and true peace. It is the movement of God in Christ to us and through us into the world. Christ emptying himself is about opening up space to fill all things with his love. Emptying ourselves of our competitive and evaluative falseness in humility, opens us up to embrace the beauty in others and ourselves in love.

But not only that. Recognizing beauty in others for all their limitations and the beauty of God in ourselves for all our limitations is also, according to the apostle, the recipe for building genuine relationships and genuine community. Instead of being deceitful and false with others because we want to get them on side, why not respect them enough to be truthful, truthful with gentleness and kindness? Why not try to find another basis for loving ourselves and recognizing our own value than how much better we are than others or how we can get others to like us?

All of us struggle with good and bad in us. All of us have our days and moments. All of us can rise high but also sink low. All of us can shine brightly and all of us can fail miserably. The gift of humility opening to the beauty in others is about love catching a glimpse of divine glory in others, even the most wretched. You need humility for that kind of seeing.

You need to be stripped of that whole layer so dependent on what others think or how you compare to others. You need to accept yourself for who you are. You are much more than you imagine you are. But you are also less.... And that's ok. God thinks you are infinitely precious.... That is why you are alive on this earth. You don't have to be the best or the greatest or the most beautiful or successful to be infinitely and uniquely precious. The power of humility is to know this as true and to be at home in this truth.

So then, humility is not weakness or passivity or shame. It is power, power that inspires love to grow strong. It's about being free from what others think, being mindful of what God thinks. It's about embracing true beauty and recognizing it in ourselves and others.

But it's hard to live this way, isn't it? It's so hard! And so, the apostle finishes his teaching on humility with these words: "work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and work for God's good pleasure." Yes, God is working, planting seeds in us that grow into beauty. But every day we are also caught up by the opinions and concerns of others, our own wretchedness, fear, resentment, envy, shame, stress... Salvation won't come easy, the apostle tells us. We have to be prepared to work hard. We need discipline and focus. We need to pay attention and be open. We need help to be saved. We have to do it in fear and trembling because we will fall flat on our face repeatedly and feel like failures at times. But we must not give up or give in. We must incorporate the solid disciplines of worship, prayer and meditation. We must build relationships that are real not based on falsity. We must be part of a community that nourishes us not tears us down in competitive evaluations.

The journey toward humility is not easy as the Philippian hymn to Christ shows us. To be stripped of everything in the world that means something is not easy. Status, reputation and the opinion of others is powerful. But it keeps us weak and dependent in all the wrong ways. Ambition of this kind is a spiritual death sentence. Humility is the antidote. Humility creates inner space for genuine love to grow in us, making us real and strong, alive to beauty, fulfilled, at peace. This is our divine destiny as created children of God.

Let us pray: Open me up to genuine beauty, O God. Inspire me to see and feel as you see and feel. Give me the humility of Christ, so that I may be free to be me in all my wondrous beauty... and free to embrace others as they are in all their beauty, not as I want them to be... Amen.