

²³When he entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him as he was teaching, and said, "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?" ²⁴Jesus said to them, "I will also ask you one question; if you tell me the answer, then I will also tell you by what authority I do these things. ²⁵Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?" And they argued with one another, "If we say, 'From heaven,' he will say to us, 'Why then did you not believe him?' ²⁶But if we say, 'Of human origin,' we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet." ²⁷So they answered Jesus, "We do not know." And he said to them, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.

²⁸What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work in the vineyard today.' ²⁹He answered, 'I will not'; but later he changed his mind and went. ³⁰The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, 'I go, sir'; but he did not go. ³¹Which of the two did the will of his father?" They said, "The first." Jesus said to them, "Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you. ³²For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him; and even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him.

In Nomine Jesu

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We've had many blessings over the years at Nativity. Some we share with all other Christian communities. Some are very special to this congregation ... perhaps not shared by any ... or many ... others.

One of those distinct blessings is something we take some significant pride in – that we have never had significant long term debt in this congregation. Funds for capital or other matters that had to be borrowed for payment over time. Well ... in these times of fact checking, I'm glad I called that statement a blessing rather than a fact. It's been true much of our time, but not all.

- In November of 1964 we borrowed \$92,359.75 to buy the land and first unit of this ministry site.
- Then in 1979 we borrowed \$20,000 for three years for purposes of importance at that time. Monthly payments were \$805.66.

So, whether fact or certainly blessing for most of our life at Nativity, to whatever extent we might feel pride ... justifiably one would think ... about that reality, today's text and sermon focused on "HUMILITY" may seem at least a little odd.

After this service, in that context, one might be tempted to say that we're going to be asked to give up that decades' long cause for pride, and humble ourselves before the

challenges we face, trusting in God's promise of sufficiency as well as abundance, to choose to borrow for immediate and pressing needs.

But I'd reframe that. I'd suggest that today we're invited to ask ourselves the question, "How can we at Nativity best be the kind of community that God wants us to be?" Both today's second reading from Philippians and our Gospel text teach us that the key ingredient, if we are going to live together as the community God calls us to be, is to learn what living in HUMILITY may include in our life together..

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So, how does one preach about humility? I mean, really? I'm supposed to say, "let me tell you how to be humble, after all...I'm the humblest guy I know"? I don't think so. We need to take a moment and just remember that this is not me telling you anything. This is us submitting ourselves to what God has to say to us through the scriptures. This is why I love preaching from the lectionary. I didn't choose these texts, they've been determined for a long time. But today's sure fit, don't they.

And this sermon seeks to help us all to listen to what God is saying here. And in our two texts today we see that there are 3 Aspects of Humility.

First, let's look at the Gospel. Since last week Jesus has literally crossed over a threshold on his way to the cross for us. He has entered the gate of Jerusalem. We like to call this the Triumphal Entry. He rides into Jerusalem on a donkey and the people go wild. They're waving palm branches and shouting out "Hosanna!" No question about it ... this is the peak of Jesus' popularity.

So what does Jesus do? He goes to the temple and sees that the temple leaders have set up tables where they are selling at a huge profit animals that the pilgrims who have come to town for the big festival need to use for their offerings. They're basically ripping off the poor and making mountains off of religious requirements. Can you imagine what happens? Jesus gets mad and he turns over their tables and says that they've turned his father's house into a den of thieves and robbers.

And then he does something really important. After the dust has settled from his tirade, he shows us what God's people are supposed to be about. He reminds the leaders of Israel that his temple is supposed to be a house of prayer and then he shows them what it looks like to be God's people. He reaches out and touches the untouchable. He reminds the leaders that God is less interested in proper religious obedience to all the rules they can find than he is in reaching out to people in need.

This brings us to the first key of our text in verse 23. The leaders respond to Jesus by asking, "by what authority are you doing this?" In other words, "Who do you think you are, Jesus?"

And here's where we see the first aspect of Humility. It's about AUTHORITY.

I've got to admit, if we were those religious leaders and Jesus came in and did that in this place of worship, I think I'd have reacted the same way. But let's think of it this way. Imagine that you are the CEO of a big corporation. You've earned the right to be in that position. You've got an MBA, you worked your way up the ladder.

Then one day some noisy office clerk starts spouting off around the office about how the corporation should be run...and people listen. And it's, of course, not like you're running it. Pretty soon many of the workers are singing the same song and they're starting to make you look like some kind of dinosaur. What do you?

Well, let's say that the corporation is IBM and it is the early 90's. The young employee is a guy who has been tuned into this new-fangled idea called the internet and he starts telling people that if IBM doesn't get their act together they'll be left in the dust. That's exactly where the execs at IBM found themselves. They were faced with a choice. Do they protect their authority and power, or do they listen to this low-ranking nobody and change their perspective. Well, guess what? They listened, and they changed, and IBM was able to transition into the new world of cybercommerce.

When we think about life in the church and about trying to be the community of God, how often do we run right into this issue of authority and power struggles. I bet you know the seven last words of the church: "We've never done it that way before." Another version: "We've always done it that way before." We think, "this is MY church, this is how I like it. Don't change anything on me."

Let's just try a simple example here. Have you ever walked into worship and realized. "There's somebody in my seat!" When we say it, it sounds silly and petty, but it's true, isn't it. Even with stuff like that, we don't like change, we don't like people challenging our ideas or ways of doing things. I totally get that.

Maybe I've got an advantage since, as a pastor, I work with both adults and youth and kids. So maybe I've got a bit of a different perspective. The world that our children and youth live in isn't the world that we older folk are from. Like it or not, the world has changed. And we have to be careful that we don't fall into the same trap that the leaders of Israel did. They were so caught up with their own place of authority and their own perception of what they thought God was like, that they weren't able to see what God was actually doing right in front of them.

And here's the truth. God is at work in our world, all around us. And that means that what's changing around us, believe it or not, might just be what God's about among us. And that means that if we're going to be the community God calls us to be, then we've got to be willing to let go of our sense of power and authority and look around at the larger community and ask, "What is God doing?"

And I guarantee that just like a radical Jesus just before our text caused a major scene in the streets of Jerusalem, whatever God's doing, it's pushing the boundaries.

And here's the thing about Authority. We have to remember, it's not our church, it's not our agenda, it's not our will. It's God's authority, it's God's will, on earth as it is in Heaven.

So if we're going to live together as God's community, then we need to be willing to learn how to let go of our sense of entitlement and reach out to people and ideas that might be a little outside the box, at least from our points of view. As you can imagine, the leaders of Israel weren't too excited about this. So, Jesus goes on in our text, in verse 28, to demonstrate what he's getting after by telling them a parable about two sons. It's in this parable that we see the **second aspect of Humility. It's about ACTION.**

The story is pretty simple. The father tells the son to go work in the field and the son says, "no!" Well, in that culture that was a huge "no-no." Sons didn't defy their fathers like that without big time repercussions. So, the son was wrong. But then it says "he changed his mind and went." The Greek word here means more than changing your mind. It's deeper than that. It's more like he had a heart change. He was moved and realized that he was wrong. The direction of his heart moved from doing wrong to doing what was right.

Then there's that second son. The father tells him to go work in the field and this son says, "yes, sir, right away sir." But then he doesn't do it. We might call that "just talkin' the talk." In any event, Jesus asks the leaders of Israel, "which one did the will of the father?"

Here's food for thought. In my experience, some of the most Christ-like people I've ever known have been unbelieving folk. They've said, "NO!" to God and to the church, and yet their lifestyles are marked by caring for the poor, truly listening to others, welcoming the stranger, and genuinely loving their neighbor. And I've sadly got to admit that some of the meanest and most toxic people I've ever known have been people who have publicly professed with their mouths that Jesus is Lord and claim to know the grace of God in their lives. Go figure, eh?

Here's the thing about these two sons. They were both wrong. What separates the sons is that the first one was willing to admit that he was wrong and do something about it. Three of the most difficult words to say, "I was wrong." That's humility.

If we're going to live together as the community God calls us to be, we need to not just pay lip-service to God, go through the churchy motions, and then go on about our self-centered lives. We need to be willing to roll up our sleeves and deal with stuff. We need to own up to our own life's junk, make peace, and get on with figuring out what

God is doing around us and get in on the action of being the hands and feet of Jesus in our community.

Wow, I guess this seems like a pretty heavy-handed sermon. Believe me, I know it's tough stuff. But remember, I'm preaching to myself here. And that's why we especially need to look at the Philippians text to see **the third aspect of Humility. It's about ATTITUDE.**

Paul says it really clearly early in our second lesson. **"Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others."** Then he gives us the ultimate example of this in the next verse. **"Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking on the form of a slave."**

Jesus emptied himself. He poured himself out for us.

His attitude wasn't directed to himself. It wasn't about ME, MINE. It was about you, us, yours, and ours. Maybe you saw the news report about a Cross Country runner from a High School who was in the middle of a race. Now you know that when a high school guy starts out to run a race, there is one thing on his mind...winning. At the half way mark he turned a corner and saw one of his opponents lying on the ground, bleeding badly from his ankle. In that moment this runner did something amazing. He stopped, picked up his opponent, and carried him back to get medical attention. He emptied himself of all hope of winning. He put the needs of his opponent above his own.

That's what it looks like. That's the attitude of Christ.

So, back to our initial question. **"How can we at Nativity best be the kind of community that God wants us to be?"** Well, I think it boils down to this. In our western, American culture we are trained from childhood that life is all about ME, MINE, and MY WAY. Even a lot of our religious talk is based on MY relationship with God, My eternal destiny, MY beliefs. If I'm good with God, then I can check that off my list and move on with my life.

Here's where the big time change we talked about earlier comes in. What if we changed the ME, MINE, and MY WAY to WE, OURS, and GOD'S Way. After all, we are the body of Christ. We need each other.

This is our community both in this congregation and in the communities in which we live. And this is all God's Kingdom and we are called to be God's hands and feet in this world. Living together means sometimes letting go of things. It means admitting when we're wrong and doing something about it. And it means looking out for each other. That's humility – Jesus style.

In the Name of Jesus.

AMEN!