IT'S NOT A RACE TO THE REAR

11.08.26 -- Matthew 23:1-12

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Jesus says that those who humble themselves will be exalted. But if the only reason you humble yourself is to be exalted, you've missed the point.

THE RELUCTANT CANDIDATE

Brady Rogers was running for city council in Kelowna (kel-OWE-na), British Columbia, Canada, this fall. Well, sort of.

His entire campaign amounted to self-deprecating signs. One read, "I barely want to do this," next to his frowning face. Another said, "Let's see what happens," and another asked, "How hard can it be?" Still another read, "Just trying to pay my rent." The most unlikely said, "Hi, I'm Brady. Do I enjoy politics? No. Do I know what I'm doing? No. But am I qualified? Also, no." My favorite: "Fine, I'll do it."

Was he a serious candidate? Absolutely. He says he used satirical humor to cut through the usual noise and nonsense that saturate politics at election time. The humor prompted people to look him up, examine his platform, and, yes, vote for him.

And vote for him they did. Brady Rogers, an engineer and small-business owner by trade, was elected to the city council, where he now looks forward to bringing fresh perspectives to government.

In a political climate where candidates spend millions of dollars exalting themselves, this man humbled himself, and the voters exalted him. Sounds almost biblical, doesn't it?

CRASS SELF PROMOTION

Having just come through a rather hard-fought, grim and gruesome midterm election, it is not difficult to find examples of blatant, even crass self-promotion and exaltation. I was going to dip into some of this year's political ads and commercials for some examples, but I was afraid I'd get accused of being "too political."

So, here's one I found that's political but it's from somewhere else, not here:

Philippines Tourism Secretary Christina Garcia Frasco was tasked with creating magazine stories and ads as well as printed promotional items for tourist destinations. When people looked at the ads, however, they commented that Ms. Frasco appeared prominently in every tourism-related photo, magazine, and promotional material.

One widely discussed example was a magazine distributed in Japan that featured a large portrait of Frasco on the cover instead of a Philippine scenic attraction. Advertising professionals and members of the public questioned why, after photographing hundreds of tourism sites, the publication chose a portrait of the tourism secretary.

What, or rather who, exactly was taxpayer money being spent to promote? The controversy faded away when Ms. Frasco agreed to have pictures of her taken down and replaced with pictures of actual Philippines attractions.

Perhaps a step back in history would do well to illustrate this point.

The Roman emperor Nero is remembered today largely for tyranny and cruelty as well as his extravagance, but he was also a gifted designer and urban planner responsible for some truly impressive structures and developments in the city of Rome

His most famous construction was the Domus Aurea (Golden House) an enormous palace complex built after the Great Fire of Rome in 64 C.E. The palace included lavish gardens, artificial lakes, dining halls, elaborate frescoes, and rooms decorated with gold, precious stones, and ivory. Ancient writers were stunned speechless by its scale and luxury.

For many Romans, however, the palace became a symbol of a ruler who seemed more interested in glorifying himself than serving the public. The fact that vast tracts of central Rome were devoted to the emperor's private residence fueled resentment.

To be fair, Nero did not merely build a palace. After the fire, he implemented several urban reforms that many historians agree were sensible and forward-looking.

- Wider streets to prevent future fires.
- Regulations on building materials.
- Height restrictions for buildings.
- Greater spacing between structures.
- Improved access to water supplies.

More often, however, his development leaned toward the opulent and ostentatious. A large public market known as the Macellum Magnum. New bath complexes. A wooden amphitheater for games and performances.

More than anything, Nero wanted to be remembered as a talented lutist and singer as well as a great designer of grand and glorious buildings. To this end, his performances and designs were a failure. Today he is remembered mostly as a cruel tyrant who fed prisoners to wild animals in his new arena for the entertainment of the audience.

Inevitably, when our only goal is to exalt ourselves, our attempts ultimately fail. This is as true of churches as it is of individuals. It is only in exalting others and Jesus Christ that we are, sometimes, exalted.

IN THE SCRIPTURE

Last week, one of the scriptures for All Saints Sunday was Matthew 5:1-12, The Beatitudes. Today, the Gospel lesson is Matthew 23:1-12. In it Jesus chastises the Pharisees for their ostentatious displays of religiosity which they parade through the marketplace to impress everyone with how pious and humble they are.

In both passages a common theme emerges: HUMILITY.

In the Beatitudes Jesus calls “blessed” those who are merciful, those who are peacemakers, those who are meek, those who mourn, and those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. He promises rewards in heaven for those who endure persecution.

In this Sunday’s gospel lesson Jesus tells the crowds to do as the scribes and Pharisees teach, but not as they do, because they don’t practice what they preach. They value the appearance of righteousness more than righteousness itself. They practice their religious rituals as a means of exalting themselves. They want to be known for the length and eloquence of their prayers, the sharp creases in their suits, the size of their offering, the number of years they’ve served on the board, and all the sacrifices they’ve made for the church. They want to be the humblest person in the room so they can be the greatest person in the room.

Better, he says, is genuine humility that seeks no reward. He warns against affixing titles to anyone in the Christian community, lest the title become more important than the service that gave rise to it.

He concludes the teaching with this admonition: “The greatest among you will be your servant. All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted.”

This is one of many examples in the Gospels of what biblical scholars often call the “great reversal” or the “upside-down kingdom,” in which God’s values overturn worldly assumptions about status, power, wealth, and greatness. A few others include:

- Matthew 20:26-28 “Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant... just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve.”
- Mark 9:35 “If anyone wants to be first, he shall be last of all and servant of all.”
- Mark 10:43-44 “Whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant.”
- Luke 22:26 “Let the greatest among you become as the youngest, and the leader as one who serves.”
- Matthew 19:30 “Many who are first will be last, and the last first.”
- Matthew 20:16 “So the last will be first, and the first last.”
- Mark 10:31 “Many who are first will be last, and the last first.”
- Luke 13:30 “There are last who will be first, and there are first who will be last.”
- Luke 14:11 “Everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.”
- Matthew 21:31 “The tax collectors and prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God before you.”
- Matthew 18:1: “Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.”
- Children had low social status in the ancient world, yet Jesus presents them as the model for greatness.
- Mark 10:14-15 “Whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it.”

At least 13 times Jesus commends us to his “upside down kingdom.”

We preachers often search in vain when we try to find an example of this kind of behavior, this kind of selfless activity that neither expects nor asks for any special recognition or praise.

Names like Mother Theresa and St. Francis of Assisi come to mind, of course. Father Damien of Molokai who ministered to the lepers and eventually died of that horrible disease. Maximilian Kolbe (1894-1941) A Polish Franciscan priest imprisoned at Auschwitz. When a married man with children was selected to die in retaliation for an escape, Kolbe volunteered to take his place. He died in the starvation bunker, giving his life so another might live.

Mother Marianne Cope the Franciscan sister from New York who came to Hawaii to care for people with leprosy. After Damien's death, she continued serving the residents of Molokai for decades. Unlike Damien, she did not die from the disease, but she gave the remainder of her life to those whom society had cast aside. And Dr. Paul Farmer the modern physician who abandoned his comfortable practice and spent much of his life serving the poorest communities in Haiti and around the world and whose life became a powerful example of abandoning comfort and privilege in order to stand with the suffering.

Dr. Carlo Urbani an Italian physician identified the outbreak of SARS in 2003 and helped alert the world to the danger. In caring for patients and investigating the disease, he contracted SARS himself and died. His sacrifice likely helped save countless lives.

RACE TO THE REAR

Unfortunately, these challenging sayings of Jesus often inspire not genuine humility but a “race to the rear”: people competing to be the humblest, the least, and the last so that they can be first. They want to eliminate grace from the equation: “I’m the humblest person you ever saw.” Or, “I’ll be the least of these so God won’t have any choice but to welcome me into God’s kingdom. I’ll take that golden escalator into heaven, looking down and laughing at all those who missed the ride.”

But such an interpretation of Jesus’ words misses the point altogether. It isn’t about being first or last; it’s about there being no first and no last at all in the kingdom.

In God’s kingdom, there is no first or last, no exalted or lowly, no great or small, no young or old, no favored or forgotten—and on and on. There is no rank and no order. Leave your medals and honors, your achievements and accomplishments, at the gate. Lay down your wealth and power, your popularity and your status.

This is the New Jerusalem, where gold has no value—even the streets are paved with it. This is the Great Kingdom, where everyone sits on a throne: male and female, straight and gay, black and white and red and brown, old and young, plain and beautiful. It is where appearances do not matter and all races sing together with one voice in the great heavenly choir.

This is the place where every need is met, every hope is realized, every wish is honored, and every dream comes true—where those who mourn are made glad and God wipes every tear from every eye.

This is the Kingdom of God and the tickets are free.

SINGING –

People get ready - there's a train a-comin'
You don't need no baggage you just get on board
All you need is faith to hear diesels a-humming
You don't need no ticket you just thank the Lord.

AMEN