

A HUMBLING EXPERIENCE

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” And Jesus said to his disciples, “Have a big slice of humble pie!” Simon Peter stepped forward and, as he so often did, spoke on behalf of all of the disciples, “Lord, I’m probably the most humble person I know; I could talk about my humility for hours.” Jesus turned and looked at him and said, “Simon, son of Jonah, to quote the great leader of Israel in years to come, Golda Meir, ‘Don’t be so humble; you’re not that great!’”

That’s my *very* loose paraphrase of Matthew 18:1-5, in which Jesus takes his disciples down way more than a notch or two. Simon may have still been basking in the glow of Jesus nicknaming him Peter, “Rocky,” and promising to build his church on that rock. We know that Peter’s fellow disciples, James and John (or their mother, depending on which gospel you read), asked Jesus, “Teacher, grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.” (Mark 10:37) We also know that Jesus asked his disciples in Capernaum, “What were you arguing about the way?” His disciples were silent “for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest.” (Mark 9:33-34)

Remember, this jockeying for position and power and glory among the disciples comes after Jesus has told them not just once but twice that he is on his way to Jerusalem where he will suffer and die at the hands of the religious leaders. Jesus has also told his disciples, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.” (Matthew 16:24-25)

Perhaps you learned this story about Jesus and the little child when you were a child yourself. It’s easy to sentimentalize this story, especially if the picture of gentle Jesus cradling a cute, tiny lamb in his arms, pops into your head. Read the first five verses by themselves and you might think Jesus is teaching us we ought to be nice to children (which, of course, we should be) and we ought to work hard to have a childlike (not childish) faith; that is, open, honest, sincere, even naïve (?).

Of course, there’s nothing wrong with those two instructions, to be nice to children and imitate their faith. However, that’s not really what Jesus is talking about to his disciples when he puts the little child in their midst and tells them, “Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of God. Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.” (Matthew 18:3-4)

The key words here are “change” and “humble.” Let’s go back to Jesus’ offer of a big slice of humble pie. Have you ever wondered where that expression comes from? Apparently, it is a very old saying, dating back to 17th century England. The original

spelling was “umble,” minus the “h,” which came from the word “umbles.” “Umbles” refer to the insides of animals that most of us would rather not eat – intestines, heart, liver, and the like. The wealthy people ate the best parts of the animals. The poor and lowly had to eat the parts that were thrown away, the “umbles,” the humble pie. In time, “eating humble pie” came to mean being in a lowly or servant state.¹

When I shared that information with folks in the Wednesday morning Bible study, one person said, “Ooh, I don’t think I want to eat any of that.” Exactly! We don’t want to eat humble pie, either literally or figuratively. From a literal point of view, it sounds unappetizing and undesirable. In a figurative sense, it crashes up against what seems to be our natural inclination to puff ourselves up, to jockey for position, or look out for #1. At the very least, changing and becoming humble means we have to stop comparing ourselves to other people, since we inevitably end up thinking something like, “Well, I may not be perfect, but at least I’m not like that person!”

Doesn’t that sound a lot like the story Jesus told about the Pharisee and the tax collector praying in the temple? The tax collector thanked God he wasn’t like other people (even the tax collector there with him) and then listed the good things he did – fasting twice a week and tithing. Meanwhile, the tax collector bowed his head, beat his breast, and confessed, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!” In a surprising twist, Jesus told his listeners that the tax collector is the man who went home in a right relationship with God, and reminded them, “for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.” (Luke 18:9-14)

Interesting little word, this word “humble.” It comes from the Latin word *humus* which means “ground, earth.” That reminds us God’s words to Adam (whose name, by the way, means “from the ground”) after the man was banished from the Garden of Eden: “By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread until you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” (Genesis 3:19) What a sobering moment it is, when we gather at a graveside and I say those words of committal, “earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust.” It’s a stark reminder that is summed up in a sign I saw hanging on the wall at the Little Chapel on the Boardwalk (Presbyterian Church) in Wrightsville Beach, that said, “Yes, there is a God. It is not you.”

It must have been a humbling experience for the disciples to have Jesus answer their question about greatness and positions of power with instructions about changing their whole perspective on how life operates and then following through on it. Jesus’ answer to “become humble” is right in line with so much of what he says about being part of God’s kingdom: the greatest among you must become servant of all; the last will be first and the first will be last; I came not to be served, but to serve; the exalted shall be humbled and the humbled shall be exalted. That’s the way life is in God’s kingdom, Jesus said, and he put a little child in their midst as a flesh-and-blood visual aid.

It’s not that children weren’t loved by their families in 1st century A.D. Palestine, but their status was very different from our children today. Children were way at the bottom of the hierarchy. They were vulnerable. They were helpless. They were completely dependent. And that’s exactly how we are supposed to see ourselves in relation to God. That’s what it means to “become like children and be humble like a child” in the kingdom of heaven.

It's interesting that the word "humiliate" comes from the same root word *humus* as does "humble." No one of us wants to be humiliated in front of other people. But that's not what Jesus is telling us. Instead, he calls us to be "humble," which involves making ourselves vulnerable before God and surrendering control to God. And isn't that so very hard to do?

The Covid-19 pandemic has pulled back the curtain on so many realities and issues in life. With all of the uncertainty about the present, much less the future, our anxiety levels are high. We realize how much we're not in control in this particular situation, as if we're ever **really** in control of life. To say the least, this is a humbling experience for many of us.

But humbling doesn't mean hopeless! If becoming humble means bowing down and putting ourselves in a lower position (as hard as that is for us to do), remember that we are humbling ourselves before Jesus Christ himself. Remember how Jesus revealed to his disciples that for him being Messiah meant suffering and dying? Here's how the apostle Paul described what Jesus has done for us: "who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross." (Philippians 2:6-8)

The disciples' question about who is the greatest and Jesus' answer about becoming humble made me think of Mac Davis' song, "It's Hard to Be Humble." The chorus says,

*Oh, Lord, it's hard to be humble, when you're perfect in every way.
I can't wait to look in the mirror, 'cause I get better looking each day.
To know me is to love me, I must be a heck of a man,
Oh, Lord, it's hard to be humble, but I'm doin' the best that I can.*

When that song describes our lives, even or especially in the church and in our relationship with God, we need to accept Jesus' offer, "Have a big slice of humble pie!" And we might even want to say, "Lord, may I please have another piece of pie?"

Let us pray: Holy God, your disciples argued about who would be greatest in your kingdom. Help us to be confident in the love you have for us, so that we feel no need to compete for your attention. We pray these things in the name of Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen.

NOTES

¹Brian Lamew, "Enjoying Humble Pie," January 23, 2013 at www.brianlamew.files.wordpress.com.