

"YOU HAVE REASON TO BE HUMBLE"

Park Avenue United Methodist Church
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TEXT: "In humility count others better than yourselves".
(Philippians 2: 3)

INTRODUCTION

The title of this sermon is "You Have Reason To Be Humble", and it was inspired by an anecdote attributed to one of those "world class" insulters - someone like Churchill, Chesterton, Shaw or Mencken. Someone like that. I selected the title early on in the week, thinking that I'd be able to find the anecdote later in the week and quote it to you accurately and give proper credit to whoever said it.

But...you'll recall that last Fall a candidate withdrew from the presidential race and those of us who make speeches in public on a regular basis all of a sudden got nervous about our sources. And, for the life of me...I can't find that anecdote. I can't remember who said it or about whom it was said, which up to last Fall wouldn't have bothered me very much. I might have been tempted to fake it, make up the names, but in the current climate one can't do that. We've got to be careful and all I can say is that someone once said of someone else,

"So and So's a humble man". And a third person said, "Yes...he has much to be humble about.."

It would have been a better story for you if I could have remember it with greater accuracy, but we can still use the punch line in order to get us into this sermon, "He has reason to be humble." I could say, we all do!

DEVELOPMENT OF IDEA

That is what Paul is trying to communicate to the Philippians. Our text, "But in humility count others better than yourselves" is a bit of advice prompted by a church fight, which is not what you would expect in Philippi. And that in itself is a lesson for us.

Paul loved the Philippians. One gets the impression in reading Paul's Letter to the Philippians that Philippi is a model Church - the perfect Church. Last week we introduced this Letter with a sermon on the first chapter in which Paul poured out his heart to the Philippians. You could see that they were an exceptional Church. Paul's in prison writing this letter, sensing that the end is near. And the Philippians sense this, too. He tells them, the way you would tell somebody you will never see again, how much he loves them. He elaborates on what they have meant to him. He tells them that of all the churches that he has founded, that they're the best and the only ones who stood by him through thick and thin.

Now Paul is always in some controversy. And the Philippians never abandoned him. Paul was something of a renegade apostle. He didn't have the "quality credentials" that the other apostles had. To be an apostle you had to know Jesus in his early life. Paul called himself an Apostle, but he didn't have the credentials. Those original apostles were part of the establishment. They were members of Christ Church in Jerusalem - the Mother Church. Paul was not. He was a bit of an outsider with a new interpretation of what Jesus meant for this world. They were the arch-conservatives of the old tradition. Paul was the "radical" with some new ideas to work in.

The issue was over whether Jesus came for the Gentiles as well as for the Jews. Paul said, "Yes". The apostles in Jerusalem said "No". They said that you had to become a Jew before you could become a Christian, which meant you had to be circumcised, you had to worship in the Temple, you had to obey the dietary and ritual laws, all 613 of them. And Paul said "No". Paul said Christ has come to free us from the Law and by the Law he meant all of those many rules.

And he won his argument. That's an amazing testimony to Paul's brilliance and eloquence. He won. At the First Council of the Church ever held, in Jerusalem, he won the right to preach to the Gentiles, and bring them into the Church as Gentiles.

But that didn't put an end to the controversy. Wherever Paul went, his detractors followed him like a "truth squad". He'd leave one Church and the next day they would move in, start refuting him, start questioning his authority. They'd say, "You know Paul doesn't have the proper credentials, don't you?" They'd start questioning his integrity, "Do you ever wonder about what Paul does with all the money he collects from the Churches?" It was terrible. Most of Paul's letters were sent to churches after the "truth squad" had been there doing its work. He writes to defend himself.

But you read the first chapter of Philippians and you say, "But this Church is different". That didn't happen there. None of that stuff here. Philippi has to be the exception. It's the model Church. He thanks them for "hanging in" there with him, for not being dissenters, for being on his side in the struggle. And he thanks them for sending Epaphroditus to him with a present - a love offering. How kind. It's a special relationship that he has with the philippians. Obviously, an extraordinary church.

TROUBLE IN PHILIPPI

But Epaphroditus, who brought the present and stayed for a season with Paul, revealed that even in Philippi there is trouble. We can assume that it's the same old battle. The "truth squad" has come even to Philippi for in the third chapter, Paul says, "Look out for the dogs". You know who he's referring to, and you get some idea of how he regarded them.

And so trouble came - even to Philippi. Who would have ever thought it? It's like learning that the best families are having trouble - in the marriage or with their kids. "I'd have never thought it could happen...why they're the perfect family...how could it have happened...model parents, wonderful people".

It happens though even in the best of families because conflict is inevitable. Sometimes in pre-marital counselling with couples, I'll ask, "Do you ever have a fight? And who takes the initiative to make up". Once in a while they'll say, "No...we never fight". And I've been close to saying, "Be careful then...maybe you shouldn't get married...not right now." You shouldn't marry anybody that you can't make up with because you're going to spend a lot of time doing that....making up, that is.

I think the perfect couple is not the one that never has conflict. But the perfect couple is the one that can quickly resolve the conflict and stay together. And not only stay together, but come closer together through the conflict.

HANDLING CONFLICT

Paul seems to be saying the very same thing about the Church. And we can extend that to other communities as well. Wherever people get together in groups there is going to be conflict. And there are those who will let it destroy the community and there are those who will try to use it to strengthen the community. And that's what Paul has in mind.

And in that context, his advice is wonderfully practical, "Consider other people better than yourselves"...which is not a counsel to put yourself down, but rather a strategy to build the community up.

I think there's a bit of misunderstanding about the Christian teaching on humility. It's attacked by some psychologists who counsel people with bad self-images. I can understand their criticism. To tell people with bad self-images that they ought to consider other people better than themselves is to compound their neurosis. They don't need to hear that. They need to hear Paul speaking to the Galatians:

"For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand fast therefore and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery".

That's what they ought to read.

And more recently, women in the Church have questioned the teaching about humility because they say - and I think this is true - that the Church has used the teaching of Christian humility to keep women in their place. Well, they should read Galatians where Paul says:

"In Christ we are now equal. So there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female but we are all one in Christ Jesus."

One should read Paul's Letter the way he wrote them. And he wrote them to particular churches with particular problems. If your problem is oppression, then read what he says to those who are oppressed. If your problem is having a bad self-image, then read what he says to those people who suffer under that burden. But, if your problem is that you are faced with conflict and you can't seem to resolve it, then read Philipians.

PEOPLE DIVIDE INTO WARRING CAMPS

People dividing into warring camps. At the office, people taking sides, one side not talking to the other. Hello somebody. At home, a couple estranged. They can feel the silence, touch the hurt. Or, in a Church where there is disagreement over what it means to be a Christian. Some say that in order to be a Christian you have to believe this or that. Others say that you cannot call yourself a Christian if you don't behave in a certain way. Read Philipians, because that's exactly the problem that he is addressing.

His advice is, "Humble yourself. Consider other people better than yourself". Which means stop thinking only of yourself and start thinking of somebody else. Consider that what they have to say may have some value. Give them credit for being at least as sincere in their beliefs as you are in yours.

And it's possible, you know...it's just possible that two people beginning at the same place could come out to different conclusions. And Paul, you're so right...there's lots of room at the foot of the cross. And yes, it's better to say that I belong to Him rather than that He belongs to me!

Oliver Cromwell, in the midst of the religious wars in England, said, "Pray by the bowels of Christ that you may be wrong". Thank God the English language has evolved since the 17th century, but you get the point. It's also surprising, I might add, that Cromwell would have said that. For in the eyes of his enemies, his detractors in Ireland, he was a most vicious and intolerant man. But here he is giving a counsel of humility. But perhaps that only serves to prove the point that people never fit the stereotypes that we try to stick them in. So maybe humbling yourself also means don't put people in stereotypes.

Maybe it means entering an argument with the assumption that you may be wrong. That's hard for me to do. I always thought that the point of arguing was to win. That's the fun of it. But I've been humbled. I've been in the position of making absolute statements, supported by the most incisive reasoning, with some rhetorical flourishes that would make William Buckley eat his heart out, only to have someone present me with the facts. I learned long ago in my earlier years, I have reason to be humble. I can be wrong. You could be right. As they say in Al-Anon, "You may be right".

GOAL IS RECONCILIATION

But I also learned another more important lesson and that is that being right is not important if reconciliation is the goal. Understanding what the other person is trying to say, even if the other person might be wrong, is more important if reconciliation is the goal.

People having conflict often come to counselors expecting that the counselor is going to judge who is right and who is wrong. Tell us - is he right or am I right? And they are frustrated because counselors don't do that. They don't take sides. And the counselor doesn't take sides because there are times when right and wrong really don't matter. What matters is reconciliation. And that will happen only when you can get beyond what is said to why it is said. Beyond what may be even repugnant to you - to try and understand the person who holds it. That's Paul's advice. That's what he is saying. Humble yourself. Consider others better than yourself. Which, in this context, means at least, give them credit for sincerity. And listen to them. Really try to listen to what they are saying.

And then Paul does what he always does. He turns to theology, a kind of dirty trick, really. He does that to put the present problem into a larger perspective. He lifts up the example of Christ. He's always doing that. He takes a mundane problem, such as a church squabble, a bit of tension between two people or two groups, and he lifts that up to the example of Christ. And - then the amazing thing is that what seemed to be so important, all of a sudden seems petty.

To the congregation that is having trouble with humility he says:

"Have this mind among yourselves, which you have in Christ Jesus, who, though in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped,

but humbled Himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men.

And being found in the human form He humbled Himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross. Therefore, God has highly exalted Him and bestowed upon Him a name which is above every name, that the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under earth and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."

WRAPPING IT UP THEN...

Now, what was it you said about your pride? That you would never, ever humble yourself to the likes of these. "Have this mind among yourselves which you have in Christ Jesus."

He came down from His throne - all you have to do is get off your high horse. He emptied Himself of glory - all you have to do is get rid of a little self-righteousness. He took on the form of a servant - all you have to do is admit that you are not infallible. He humbled Himself to the point of taking up the cross - all you have to do is sacrifice a bit of self pride.

See, Paul's point is that Jesus wasn't just a humble man, He was the incarnation of a loving God whose desire to end the separation between us was greater than His right to be Lord over us. To be reconciled with you, He became one with you, became like you. That's an amazing revelation. God's glory is not His righteousness, but in His forgiveness. His glory is not in His wrath, but in His love. His greatness is not in His omnipotence, but in His weakness. He loved you so much that He emptied Himself. You didn't earn that. And he didn't wait until you "shaped up" either. He didn't even wait until you repented. Paul says, "While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us."

Now, go back to that trouble again. Whose fault did you say it was? Come on now. What did you say that they have to do before you will forgive them? Tell me again, if you can remember...what started all of this?

CLOSING

Henry James once wrote,

"True happiness consists of getting out of yourself. And not only getting out of yourself - staying out of yourself. And to stay out of yourself, you must have some absorbing errand".

I like that. Well, you've got the errand...we all have, if we call ourselves a Christian. You've got the errand. I've got one, too.

"Have this mind among yourselves which you have in Christ Jesus, who did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but humbled Himself."

Consider what He did for you and you will have reason to be humble.

PRAYER

For these helpful and lifting words of St. Paul, we give Thee our thanks, dear God. Let them speak to us in our situation... keep us ever humble and ever close to You in our spiritual pilgrimage. Amen