



“The Humility Award” GROWING STORIES: The Parables of Jesus

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Philippians 2.1-11 and Luke 18.9-14

Covenant Presbyterian Church,

Madison WI

Rev. Charlie Berthoud

You just heard a powerful call to and celebration of humility from Philippians 2:1-11, citing the example of Jesus. The sermon today is called “The Humility Award.”

Let’s be clear from the start. Jesus wins. If there is a humility award, Jesus wins. And if you came to church today thinking you might win, you probably need to listen extra closely to the gospel reading for today.

⁹ Jesus also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: ¹⁰ “Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. ¹¹ The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. ¹² I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.’ ¹³ But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’ ¹⁴ I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.”

Today is the fourth Sunday of an eight-week series this summer, focusing on the parables of Jesus.

We’ve called it GROWING STORIES, with the hope that we can grow in faith, hope, and love, that we can grow as Christians as we reflect on these parables.

You’ll see on the bulletin that today is officially called the 17th Sunday of Ordinary Time, but here at Covenant, we think of this season at Growing Time.

You see two of the series of four banners for this Growing Time on the wall. The other two will appear in coming weeks. The banners of reflect the hope

that a small seed with bloom and blossom and bear good fruit, and that is the same hope we can for God's word in our lives.

If you've been in worship or if you read the newsletter this month, you've seen this quote from biblical scholar CH Dodd about parables.

“At its simplest, the parable is a metaphor or simile drawn from nature or common life, arresting the hearer by its vividness or strangeness, and leaving the mind in sufficient doubt to its precise application to tease the mind into active thought.”

So the vividness and strangeness of this parable has presented me with three questions, which I want to share with you today.

1. Who am I? Pharisee or tax collector?

Many biblical teachings seem to present an either-or choice. We are the Pharisee or the tax collector. The sheep or the goat. The younger brother or the older brother. The good fish or the bad fish.

The reality is that while we might aspire to be one way, we are rarely all one or the other.

And when we look beneath the surface of the two figures today, things get a bit more nuanced.

We have been conditioned to look down on Pharisees, but in the text today we have a man who prays, fasts, and tithes. While he does seem arrogant in his prayer, he's not all bad.

And the tax collector was not a saint. As you may know in the Roman system, tax collectors were recruited and they paid sort of a franchise fee. Then they were free to tax as much as they could from the local population. There was greed and exploitation.

So while the prayer of the tax collector is to be commended for its genuine humility, we don't know how or if this will change his life.

This brings us to a second question from the parable.

2. How can I be more humble?

We all can probably think of examples of people we know who are not humble. I have one.

As a teen, I went to summer camp in New Hampshire. When I was 15, it was the last year of being a camper. The following year, a select few would be asked to come back as Counselors-in-Training. I think there were about 20 or 25 boys and only 9 CIT spaces.

My bunk-mate was a kid named Adam from New York. Nice kid. Super neat, super organized. He had all the best camping clothes and every imaginable camping tool.

One day we were talking about who might be asked as CITs. I asked if he thought he would. He replied very matter of factly: "Why wouldn't I? I'm the model camper."

Guess who didn't get asked back as a CIT?

Sadly, we are surrounded by examples of people who are not humble. We've heard politicians and maybe co-workers or family members bragging about how great they are, how nobody is better than me at whatever.

That's how you win the arrogant award.

We see it in sports too.

Just google "pre-mature celebrations" to see athletes who start to celebrate before crossing the finish line, only to stumble and fall.



One of the best known is Leon Lett 1993 Super Bowl. A large defensive lineman, Lett scooped up a fumble and ran toward the end zone. But he started to celebrate too soon, looking at himself on the stadium big-screen, and a speedy receiver of Buffalo Bills caught him and knocked the ball loose.

That's how not to be humble. So let's think about what humility means.

Charles Spurgeon, a famous 19th century Baptist preacher made it clear that humility is not weakness:

Think not that humility is weakness; it shall supply the marrow of strength to thy bones. Stoop and conquer; bow thyself and become invincible.

Contemporary preacher Rick Warren makes a good distinction:

“Humility is not thinking less of yourself, but thinking of yourself less.”

But we need to careful talking about humility, especially those of us with a great deal of privilege. As a white, middle-class, heterosexual male, I need to recognize that humility means different things, depending on your context and life situation.

True humility is going to result in changed lives. We see changed lives in two tax collectors, elsewhere in Luke:

- In Luke 5, we read about Levi the tax collector. He had an encounter with Jesus, and then he left his old life behind and had a banquet, inviting other tax collectors and so-called sinners.
- In Luke 19, we read about Zacchaeus, another tax collector. After his encounter with Jesus, he pledges to be just and generous.

These examples are good, but the question remains:

How can I become more humble?

To help answer this question, let's turn to the great source of information and inspiration.... The internet. I read a variety of reflections on humility, and there is a lot of good food for thought out there. One sort of summary page is: <https://www.wikihow.com/Be-Humble>

On this site, there is much practical advice, in three distinct categories:

- Accept your limitations
- Appreciate others
- Rediscover a sense of wonder

As I was reading through these three categories, I found myself drawn back to an even great source of information and inspiration: The Bible.

Our reading from Philippians seems to invite us to reflect on these categories.

Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus....

(Philippians 2)

Accept your limitations = Regard others as better

Appreciate others = Look to interests of others

Rediscover a sense of wonder = Same mind as Christ Jesus

So this leads us to the third question from the parable:

3. When, where, and how do I pray?

Remember the Pharisee and tax collector were praying, and their prayers were very different

Immediately prior to our reading is another parable, specifically focused on prayer. The persistent widow. It begins like this

Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. --Luke 18:1

And earlier in the gospel, the disciples want to learn about prayer:

Jesus was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples." --Luke 11. 1

Jesus responds by teaching them the Lord's Prayer.

Prayer is central to Luke's gospel, and it's central to the life of a Christian. We are encouraged, nudged, even commanded to pray.

So let me be blunt. If church is the only time you pray, or only time you think about praying, you're missing out. You're missing out on the joy of Christian life. You're missing out on the responsibility of the Christian life. You're missing out on the opportunities to grow in the Christian life.

Prayer comes in many forms.

There is a whole tradition in Eastern Orthodox Christianity which prays a simple prayer, inspired by our gospel reading for today. It's called the Jesus Prayer. The most common form is this

“Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me, a sinner.”

Some Christians pray this prayer dozens or even hundreds of times a day.

While it's important to confess our sin in prayer and seek God's mercy, there are many other forms of prayer, including praying for other people.

While we might question how any words we might say could “force” God to intervene, Scripture repeatedly encourages us to do so. At the very least, such prayer helps us to be mindful of other people.

So this week, with the help of the prayer list and the devotional, I encourage you to pray for someone each day. Maybe the same person all week, maybe a different person each day.

Praying for others helps us to do what we are called to do as Christians: love one another.

As Christians, we rejoice that Jesus Christ came in humility, to love us and call us into a new way of life. Amen.

Read, Ponder, Pray: Steps to Humility

Sun	Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.... (Philippians 2:3-5)
Mon	When pride comes, then comes disgrace; but wisdom is with the humble. (Proverbs 11:2)
Tue	For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment... (Romans 12:3-4)
Wed	Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you. (James 4:10)
Thu	And Mary said.... God has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. (Luke 1:52-53)
Fri	And what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God? (Micah 6:8)
Sat	As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience.... Above all, clothe yourselves with love. (Colossians 3:12,14)

Read: Slowly read the Scripture for the day. Read it again.

Ponder: Pick a name from the prayer list, or of a friend or family member. Take 3 deep breaths as you think about them.

Pray: Loving God, thank you for your love that you show in Jesus Christ. Help me to follow in his ways, as I pray for _____. Help me to listen to and care for people today. Show me how to live this day, so I can make this world a better place, closer to your Kingdom. Amen.

