

Teachers and Students
Sermon for East Craftsbury Presbyterian Church
October 30, 2011

Text: Matthew 23: 1-12

Theme: True humility is the profound realization that *all* of us – including ourselves – are equally precious in God’s eyes.

Today we are challenged to discover the true meaning of humility, which is to be the hallmark of our lives as followers of Jesus. We have heard Jesus say, “All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted.” And yet, so often passages like these are misunderstood and the meaning of humility gets twisted up in our minds.

I found that Carol Zaleski’s words in *The Christian Century* spoke very powerfully to me on this point – particularly because she addresses some of the afflictions affecting our young people. Of humility she writes, “[T]he self-abnegation that turns wounded girls into cutters and anorexics [is not] a friend of true humility. Humiliation is an affliction; humility is a gift. Genuine humility orders the soul, bestowing clarity, calmness and competence. “He is humble,” writes Walter Hilton, “that truly knows himself as he is.””¹

So who are we? And what does that have to do with true humility? Before we answer these important questions let’s take a step back and look more deeply at today’s passage.

With this passage we plunge into a chapter in the Gospel of Matthew where Jesus verbally excoriates his opponents. I have to admit that the strength of Jesus’ criticism of the Jewish religious establishment of his time reflected here really stood out to me, and made me a bit uncomfortable. I’m sure I am not alone in this. For one, passages like this have been misused and abused down through the centuries to justify anti-Semitism. That was certainly not Jesus’ intent.

I also have to admit that as I read this passage in light of today being Reformation Sunday I couldn’t help but be struck by the fact that this very passage of Scripture was quite often used by leaders of the Protestant Reformation almost 500 years ago to viciously attack the Roman Catholic Church. If you read Calvin’s *Institutes of the Christian Religion* or even some of the faith statements

¹ Carol Zaleski, “The Lowly Virtue,” *The Christian Century*, 16 May 2006.

from the time of the Reformation contained in our own *Book of Confessions* of the Presbyterian Church (USA), you will find some anti-Catholic rhetoric that will make your hair curl.

Thankfully, we have come a long way in reconciling with our Roman Catholic sisters and brothers in faith as well as with our Jewish cousins. But we certainly have a long way to go.

Ultimately, though, this passage should make us uncomfortable not just because it has been used down through the centuries to criticize others, but also because it issues a challenge aimed squarely at us – the challenge to embrace true humility.

Look with me at the very first line of the passage. Jesus, three in the courts of the Temple in Jerusalem, is no longer in a back and forth with the Pharisees, the Sadducees, and the other members of the Jewish religious establishment. Their questioning of Jesus is over – now they have moved on to how they can completely get rid of him; and we know that the Crucifixion is coming very soon. Thus Jesus now turns, as the passage says, to the crowds and – more importantly – to his disciples. Jesus is now addressing the leaders of the early church, and thus addressing us as their spiritual ancestors.

Now, there are quite a number of very interesting aspects of this Scripture passage, but I am going to move directly to v. 5 and the following verses. There Jesus charges the Pharisees with the sin of pride, of arrogance, of seeking the affirmation of people rather than being true to God. And this is the challenge to us that I want to focus on today, and leads directly into our discussion of the meaning of true humility.

First, let us define the opposite of humility, which is pride. I love what C.S. Lewis wrote in *Mere Christianity*: “How is it that people who are quite obviously eaten up with Pride can say they believe in God and appear to themselves very religious? I am afraid it means they are worshipping an imaginary God. They theoretically admit themselves to be nothing in the presence of this phantom God, but are really all the time imagining how He approves of them and thinks them far better than ordinary people...”²

² C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Touchstone, 1952), 111.

Can you hear the echoes in this of Jesus' criticism of the Pharisees in our passage today? Can those of you who have studied a bit about the Protestant Reformation hear the echoes of the Reformers' criticism of the Roman Church hierarchy? But more than that, can we hear a challenge to us today?

For Jesus, in v. 8, moves from criticizing the Pharisees for setting themselves up as better than others to reminding us all that all of us are students with one teacher – and we know that that one teacher is Jesus Christ. And this Jesus, this Christ, is the one whom we affirm is fully God as well as fully human. Though we call him Lord, he did not come to lord his divinity over us, but rather to be Immanuel, God with us.

Jesus further makes his point in v. 9 by reminding us that we all have one Father in heaven. All of us are equally God's children; equally beloved and valued by the one Jesus taught us to call *abba*, "daddy."

For the essence of pride is the forgetting of our equally-beloved status before our loving heavenly Father. It is thinking that we are more loved and valued by God than are others.

Conversely, humility is remembering how each and every one of us is special and precious in God's sight. It is an affirmation of our own value and affirming others' value in the same way. It is not self-humiliation or self-degradation.

Thus we come to the great challenge in preaching on humility. Of course there are those who need to reign in their pride and remember they are not more valuable to God than their neighbor. But there are others – many more of whom populate our church pews – who need to be reminded of their value in God's eyes. Humility is not a zero sum game, whereby we degrade or demean our own value so that others may experience being more valued. No, there is more than enough love from God to go around to every one of the billions of people in this world, and the billions to come as well.

Thus, today in speaking about humility I want to focus less on dialing back pride and focus more on challenging each of us to embrace of our value and belovedness by God – and to understand true humility as extending that belovedness to all.

I really like how Carter Heyward put it in the *Christian Century*: “A genuinely humble woman does not seek to play herself down, as if she should be small and insignificant next to others, but rather is able to love herself fiercely and struggles to extend this strong love to all others by advocating for their dignity and well-being.”³

I want to give a small example of this that connects with this congregation. I’m afraid that in so doing I may embarrass our own Natalie Kinsey-Warnock. Don’t worry, Natalie, all I want to do is share with folks what you told me that you say to children as you visit with them in schools and libraries throughout our state. As you know, Natalie has written some wonderful children’s books based on her own life and on the experiences of her family. Natalie shared with me that when she gets together with children, she encourages them to write their own stories about their own lives and families. In essence, she is encouraging them not just to listen to other’s voices, but to find their own voice. Underneath, Natalie is telling these children that each and every one of them is precious and has something valuable to share.

Now, not all these young people may become writers, but our hope and dream – indeed God’s hope and dream – for all of them is that they embrace their uniqueness, their preciousness, their belovedness before God. Humility is about all of us doing likewise, and extending that embrace to others.

One commentator put it this way: “Equality before God insists not only that the proud humble themselves, but that the marginalized take their place among God’s children. Not everyone has the same gifts or fulfills the same role in the community, but all are children of the same God and students of the same teacher.”⁴

Let me offer one last example of what true humility means by sharing this story from Carol Zaleski:

“We had just begun a nine-month sojourn in a studio apartment in Paris, where I was working on my dissertation. Early one morning my husband

³ Carter Hayward, “An Elusive Virtue,” *The Christian Century*, 21 October 2008.

⁴ Tim Beach-Verhey, “Matthew 23: 1-12: Theological Perspective” in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary Year A*, Vol. 4, eds. David Barlett and Barbara Brown Taylor (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 264

answered a knock at the door, thinking it might be the plumber our landlady had promised to send to fix the heating system.

As I emerged from the bathroom I saw something that stopped me in my tracks: Dom Jean Leclercq, the famous Benedictine medievalist, was crouching alongside my husband, peering at the pipes and trying to be helpful. He had received a letter of inquiry from me and decided to answer it in person. Here was a world-class scholar, a legend in his own lifetime, the most famous living monk next to Thomas Merton—and my husband took him for a plumber!

The embarrassment faded, however, as soon as it became clear that Jean Leclercq was perfectly comfortable being taken for a plumber, perfectly willing to fix our pipes if he could, perfectly willing to sit in our homely surroundings, share a baguette and discuss 12th-century thought [with a doctoral student].”⁵

What makes Leclercq such a wonderful example of humility is not that he degraded himself, but rather that he saw the studies of doctoral student as equally valuable as his own studies, even though he was world-renown teacher. Ultimately, he recognized himself in the truth that Jesus proclaimed about our human existence in Matthew 23: 8, “you are all students.” Leclercq, the great teacher, embraced that he, too was a student before our one true teacher, Jesus Christ – even if that meant studying plumbing with Carol’s husband.

In closing, let me join my voice with that of Carter Hayward in offering this challenging thought: When we meet each other in a spirit of humility, we are meeting God in one another; we are encountering and embracing that which makes us spiritual sisters and brothers of our one, loving Father. But at the same time others are meeting God in us.⁶ This is the real meaning of humility.

In Jesus’ name. Amen.

⁵ Carol Zaleski, “The Lowly Virtue,” *The Christian Century*, 16 May 2006.

⁶ Based upon Carter Hayward, “An Elusive Virtue,” *The Christian Century*, 21 October 2008.