

2014_09_07 Christian Education
Ascension Lutheran Church, Batavia IL
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Teach Children Humility By Showing Them What It Looks Like

Matthew 5:3

(cf. also the Gospel of the Day: Matthew 18:1-5)

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Grace and peace to you, from Jesus Christ, our Lord. Blessing and honor and glory and power be to Him who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb, forever and ever. Amen!

Let's do a word association exercise. I'd like you to clear your mind as best you can. I am going to say a word, and I'd like you to note what or who first comes to mind. Ready? Here is the word:

GREATNESS.

Perhaps you picture a great athlete: an olympian like Michael Phelps, or a champion, like Michael Jordan, or a legend like Mohammed Ali. Perhaps you picture a great leader: a president like George Washington, or an activist like Mahatma Gandhi. We honor greatness in terms of triumphs and trophies and tributes. And so a definition of greatness is found flooding our airwaves and filling our culture and it looks like this: the prize fighter, Mohammed Ali, stands tall with fists held high, and says: "I am the greatest."

If we were listing "greatest" virtues, what would be on the top?

Resiliency: Don't let anyone tell you it is not possible. Anything is possible, if you put your mind to it.

Independence: Don't ever become dependent on others. Take your future into your own hands.

Self-expression: Don't let anyone tell you how to think. Make something of yourself.

There is a temptation to think greatness is measured in terms of excelling in life. Our children get the impression that life is about climbing the ladder to the top, so they think in terms of degrees and honors. Our children get the impression they must learn to compete in a fast paced world, so their lives are filled with after school programs,

sports, and music lessons. It's a dog eat dog world, and you need to be the dog who comes out on top.

Is this what greatness looks like to God? ... a prize fighter standing tall over his opponent; beating him into submission; knocking him down; and standing towering above him; grabbing the microphone as the camera zooms in; and saying: "I am the greatest."

When the disciples ask Jesus, "who is greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" What does He show them? What does greatness look like?

Then Jesus called a little child to Him, set him in the midst of them, and said, "Assuredly, I say to you, unless you are converted and become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore whoever humbles himself as this little child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. (Matthew 18:2-4)

A child? No trophies; no tributes; no trophy. Little resiliency, complete dependency, and in his day, no self-expression allowed. It's the humility of poverty; neediness; dependence. A child is constantly in need of someone else to provide, protect, and preserve. It is the face of a child that Jesus shows us; a face of humility; a face which is below, looking up; a face which is looking up to Jesus. And so the words of Jesus in Matthew 5:3 tell us what God really values:

Matthew 5:3 Blessed are the poor in spirit, For theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

This Christian Education Sunday, we consider the greatest of all virtues in God's eyes: humility. We consider how the greatest of all virtues is also the most difficult to possess. And we consider how to teach it to our children – by showing them what it looks like. Blessed are the poor in spirit.

The poet writes:

*Humility! the sweetest, loveliest flower
That bloom'd in Paradise, and the first that died,
Has rarely blossom'd since on mortal soil.
It is so frail, so delicate a thing,
'Tis gone if it but look upon itself;
And she who ventures to esteem it hers,
Proves by that single thought she has it not.*

That is to say, as soon as you think you've got it, you've lost it. Or as Luther puts it, "Humility is so tender and so precious that it cannot bear to look at its own face."

Yes, humility cannot bear to look at its own face; it is humble and looks not to itself to know what humility is. But humility does have a face. What does that face of humility look like?

What does humility look like when a husband and wife asks her husband to stay home this Saturday and help wash the windows? He claims to have told her about his plans to go golfing. But he's been gone all week, and she needs him home with her. Will she say something like: if you love me, you'll stay and clean the windows? Did he really tell her about his plans? What will humility look like?

What does humility look like when a mother is running late getting his kids to school? She needs to shave about 10 minutes off her normal time, if she doesn't want them to be tardy. What will humility look like?

What does humility look like when Christian citizen talks about the president? He didn't vote for him and he really has no interest in paying taxes to a broken system. He thinks President Obama is leading this country to its demise. What will humility look like?

What does humility look like when a member of the congregation discovers another member of the congregation is living with his girlfriend and they are not married? Bill was talking to Jim after bowling and discovers Jim has moved in to his girlfriend's place. What does Bill do? Does he go tell his wife? Does he go tell his pastor? Does he talk about it in the church hallways? Does he ignore it? Does he send a nasty letter? What will humility look like?

What does humility look like when someone tells Jim that living with his girlfriend outside of marriage is not what God intends for them? Does he say, this is none of your business? Does he say, who are you to judge me? Does he shew him out the door and say don't ever come back? What will humility look like?

Humility cannot bear to look at its own face; it is too busy; humility is too busy to look at itself, because it is busy looking to God's word and the needs of others. For us, this is why humility is so difficult to possess. We are too competitive; too busy looking at ourselves and how we measure up. We look in the mirror again and again; comparing and competing with others; wondering how we look; wondering what other people think; wondering if anyone noticed; wondering how we stack up with the next guy.

But humility cannot bear to look at its own face.

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Humility cannot be seen in one's own face. As soon as you think you've got it, it is gone.

Instead, humility is seen by looking to the face of another. It is seen in the face of another man – one who was equal with God, but did not consider it something to show off; it is the face of one who made Himself of no reputation and came in the form of a servant.

It is the face which was him who was the greatest, but considered himself the least.

It is the face of Him who submitted to his parents when they found him in the Temple and told him to come home.

It is the face of Him who submitted to the government, saying: "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesars."

It is the face of Him who submitted to his disciples when he washed their feet.

It is the face of Him who was willing to lie down on the mat in front of his enemies ... who sacrificed all things for the sake of those who stepped on him ... who was perfectly righteous, but was too busy seeking and saving sinners to notice.

This is the spiritual poverty of the cross; where Jesus becomes last to put you first. He lays down his soul for you; He becomes your sin before God's judgment for you. This is the face of humility: crowned with thorns, looking up to heaven, and saying: Father forgive them. And this is the face of greatness: risen, glorified, and exalted in heaven, so that all who see His face, would be saved.

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Teach children the face of humility by showing them what it looks like: poor. All those virtues the world prizes to highly are worthless before God. For he values your spiritual poverty; your neediness; your brokenness; your dependency – for unless you are converted and become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven. It is only when learn to look up to Jesus as a little child, in need of someone else to provide, protect, and preserve them eternally – only then do we see and know and show what humility is; only then do we possess the kingdom of heaven.

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We know what humility looks like; lets show what humility looks like.

Humility is seen in the face of a husband who realizes his wife needs him. He realizes that he's been gone all week for work, and his calling is not to go golfing, but to be a husband. At the same time, the wife realizes, that even though she is pretty sure he didn't mentioned the golf outing, she should be more upfront and tell him that she misses him rather than he needs to wash the windows. So she apologizes for not being more upfront and he decides to cancel his plans and stay home.

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Humility is seen in the face of a Christian citizen who respects and submits to his president. Sure, he didn't vote for him, but God appointed him. He knows what Paul says in Romans 13 – “the authorities that be are appointed by God ... therefore you also be subject.” He resists complaining and pays his taxes and his children see humility in a father who submits to his president.

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Humility is seen in the face of a mother who is willing to let her kids be tardy, in order to obey the traffic laws. It is only after running a red light that she stops the car in a near by parking lot. She turns and tells her children that she shouldn't have done that and she is sorry. She drives the speed limit the rest of the way, and drops her kids off late.

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Humility is seen in a congregation which refuses to gossip, in order to seek and save that which is lost. In conversation with him, Bill learns that Jim is living with his

girlfriend outside of marriage. Rather than going to the pastor, or talking to his wife about it, he remains quiet. Next week after bowling, Bill brings it up again. He points out that what is happening is not what God intends for them and that they should get married first. He knows he is risking his friendship, but he knows that God has said, “if your brother sin, go and talk to him, just you and him alone.”

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Humility is seen in Christians who fear God’s word and love one another. Bill knows Jim is right, and he knows what God says. Sure living with his girlfriend makes things financially easier and he is pretty sure they will get married some day, but he knows their living situation is sinful. He repents and Bill assures him of his forgiveness. Jim decides to move out until they are ready to get married.

And the saying of Jesus shows us what humility is when He says, *Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of God. (Matthew 5:3)*

Children are not born with it. Sure they come out cute, cuddly, and cooing, but it doesn’t take long before they become defiant, disobedient, and disrespectful. It doesn’t take long before they learn to say what they’re thinking: I want ... mine ... no! Without anyone having to teach them, they learn to grab, take, argue, complain, whine, steal, and lie. This is the world’s path to greatness.

But God has given parents and the Church so that children can unlearn what they know by nature and learn what greatness truly is. They are given parents so that they might be shown what humility looks like: so that they might see Jesus; and we pray they would see Jesus in their fellow Christians, their moms and dads, their brothers and sisters, their pastor and congregation – wherever Christians are looking up to Jesus, there children see what humility looks like.

And so our children grow up to be prize fighters for God – willing to be beaten for His sake; submitting to the needs of their neighbors; being knocked down, so someone else can stand up; and there laying on the mat, giving up the microphone, and putting the camera off of self and onto Jesus, we show what the face of humility looks like, leading others to say: “Jesus is the greatest.”

Amen.