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Ascension Lutheran Church, Batavia IL
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Humility: Letting God Tear You Down, So That He Can Lift You Up

James 3:13-4:10

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Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

James 3:13–4:10

¹³ Who *is* wise and understanding among you? Let him show by good conduct *that* his works *are done* in the meekness of wisdom. ¹⁴ But if you have bitter envy and self-seeking in your hearts, do not boast and lie against the truth. ¹⁵ This wisdom does not descend from above, but *is* earthly, sensual, demonic. ¹⁶ For where envy and self-seeking *exist*, confusion and every evil thing *are* there. ¹⁷ But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality and without hypocrisy. ¹⁸ Now the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.

⁴ Where do wars and fights *come* from among you? Do *they* not *come* from your *desires for* pleasure that war in your members? ² You lust and do not have. You murder and covet and cannot obtain. You fight and war. Yet you do not have because you do not ask. ³ You ask and do not receive, because you ask amiss, that you may spend *it* on your pleasures. ⁴ Adulterers and adulteresses! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Whoever therefore wants to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God. ⁵ Or do you think that the Scripture says in vain, “The Spirit who dwells in us yearns jealously”?

⁶ But He gives more grace. Therefore He says:

“God resists the proud,

But gives grace to the humble.”

⁷ Therefore submit to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you. ⁸ Draw near to God and He will draw near to you. Cleanse *your* hands, *you* sinners; and purify *your* hearts, *you* double-minded. ⁹ Lament and mourn and weep! Let your laughter be turned to mourning and *your* joy to gloom. ¹⁰ Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and He will lift you up.

This Word of the Lord is spoken for you.

We pray, humble us in Your sight, O Lord, that we may draw near to you, even as you draw near to us. Amen.

Its been just days since the new neighbors moved in just days ago and already your standing on tip toe, peaking over the fence to see what's they're up to. You noticed a big party van show up and begin unloading tables and chairs. You wonder what's going on over there. You notice the new pool they installed. You see the nice padio set with its brick mounted grill. Then you see the caterers arrive. And then the band. You find out he just landed a big position at the firm and they are celebrating. You sulk inside and start talking to your wife about how it sure would be nice to have a pool and how it would be fun to have a party. But there is no way you could afford either. You see you just lost your job recently. You hardly make enough off unemployment and your wife's part time job to make the mortgage. And there is something stirring inside that is just unsatisfied; unhappy; jealous. And its called pride and it just took a serious blow.

So do you ever find yourself peering over the fence, trying to get a glimpse of what's going on in other people's lives? Striving to keep up, to do better, to prove yourself? Today we will talk about humility. Humility is the opposite of pride and it happens when you find yourself torn down. It happens when your wisdom is torn down. It happens when your ambitions are torn down. It happens when your pride is torn down. And humility is when we just let it happen. That is where God goes to work. That is where he comes near and brings us his grace. Humility is Letting God Tear You Down, So That He Can Lift You Up.

1. Let Him tear down your wisdom

The disciples were on their way to Capernaum when the dispute arose. Jesus was a way off and they began discussing it: greatness. They wondered, what does greatness look like? What would my life look like if I would be considered the greatest? Who is wise and learned? And we imagine that greatness looks something like this:

Academic honors cover the walls. Graduated 4.0, summa cum laude, top of the class. Masters degree. Academic excellence. Among the most distinguished in his field. He's got pictures of himself shaking hands with the president. He's making millions now.

And there we are peeking over the fence. We are trying to get a peek into a life that is not ours, wondering whats really going on. We're comparing ourselves to him. Looking at his grill, his pool, his salary, we're looking at the plaques on his wall and

wondering how it compares with the pictures on my our walls. Because we are seeking greatness only for ourself.

13 Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show by good conduct that his works are done in the meekness of wisdom. 14 But if you have bitter envy and self-seeking in your hearts, do not boast and lie against the truth. 15 This wisdom does not descend from above, but is earthly, sensual, demonic. 16 For where envy and self-seeking exist, confusion and every evil thing are there. 17 But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality and without hypocrisy. 18 Now the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.

What greatness looks like down here is not the same as up there. That is to say, what the world sees as successful, is not the same as what God sees. For the wisdom that sees itself, in plaques on the wall, getting an edge in the conversation, peeking over the fence to see how I measure up to the other guy – is down here. It is demonic; it is the same wisdom that drove the devil out of God's presence and that drove Adam and Eve to the same. "You will be like God and you will know like God." That is the earthly, sensual, demonic wisdom that seeks after itself and sees only itself and its achievements.

And because of this, Jesus says to his disciples: "The Son of Man must be betrayed, and they will kill Him, and after he is killed he will rise the third day." And in that statement, Jesus tear down all the wisdom of the world. So Paul writes in 1 Corinthians:

For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written: "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, And bring to nothing the understanding of the prudent." (1 Corinthians 1:18–19)

This is wisdom from above, as God sees it. The wisdom which foolishly lays down itself at the foot of him who despises it, who steps on it, who crucifies it. It is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality, and without hypocrisy. In short: Jesus. The genuine wisdom from God. And in his wisdom, he meekly laid down his own achievements to accept our failures. And by his conduct, he proved what is wise. And what is wise, is to take a back seat. To become last of all and servant of all. That is what greatness looks like.

4:10 "Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and He will lift you up." God tears down our worldly wisdom and lifts us up in the wisdom of the cross. A wisdom

which sacrifices its own self-centered ideas to bring forth the fruits of righteousness; forgiveness; peace with God. And God lifts us up in the meekness of the cross. That is Humility: Letting God Tear You Down, So That He Can Lift You Up.

2. Let Him tear down your ambitions

The disciples were on their way to Capernaum and they wondered, what does greatness look like? And a dispute arose. A debate. A competition. An argument. An ambition to achieve something better than what we have, something better than what they have. And they wonder, who is the greatest? So we imagine again that greatness looks something like this:

A prize fighter stands tall, gloves raised, face beaten, bleeding, and swollen. He holds his hands high, while the competitor hangs his head in shame. He's done it. He's accomplished his dream. This has been a a life long ambition and now he's gone 15 rounds and come out on top; now he's heavy weight champion of the world. And he leans in to the microphone to say, "I am the greatest."

But there we are again, peeking over the fence. A bit jealous perhaps. But also a bit judgmental. We're looking at this guy, and what it took to get there. Seeing his beaten, bleeding, swollen face; seeing the other guy in shame and thinking, we are something better. But do our lives look much different? Sure, not so physically evident, but in other ways, we want to lean in to the microphone and say, "we're the greatest." Disputes, debates, competition – a struggle to have the latest and greatest and no one wants to be left out. But who get's hurt along the way? Who is left behind in shame after the 15 rounds are over. Who get's hurt? Where do fences come from anyway? Where do wars and quarrels begin? Where does partisanship, and political attack ads, and political buzz words, and political spin, and political protest lines come from? Where do racism, sexism, sexual commercialism, pornography and prostitution come from? Where do these big, flashy, brazen, media savvy, multi-million dollar political campaigns come from?

2 You lust and do not have. You murder and covet and cannot obtain. You fight and war. Yet you do not have because you do not ask. 3 You ask and do not receive, because you ask amiss, that you may spend it on your pleasures. 4 Adulterers and adulteresses! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Whoever therefore wants to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God. 5 Or do you think that the Scripture says in vain, "The Spirit who dwells in us yearns jealously"?

Our God is a jealous God. He is not interested in sharing you with the world. He is not interested in only knowing you by peeking over the fence once and a while to see what is going on. He will not be fenced out while you go along and make friends with the world. It is adultery. It is a break in the marriage relationship you share with God. And it makes the Spirit of God jealous. For you belong to God. For you were bought with a price. And that price is worth far more than any success story can offer you.

So when Jesus enters, He asks, "What was it you disputed among yourselves on the road?" But we keep silent. For we know what our lips have said, and what our hands have handled, and what our hearts have desired. We know our ambition has been sinful. And so we say nothing. And He sits down. He gathers us here to himself and says, "If anyone desires to be first, he shall be last of all and servant of all."

This is Christ's ambition. To be our servant. He is torn down from his rightful place at the top to live a death story which ends in condemnation, suffering, and death. But his ambition is for us. And so his is our friend. He is our Savior. And he purchases us with his own blood. He is so jealous, so earnest to have us back, that he offers the greatest price. To give himself to the enemy; to suffer for our sins. And the ambition of God brings life. Raises him on the third day and places him in our hearts. So that we leave this world by faith. We are torn down with him, and lifted up in his resurrection. And there we are friends with God once again. Oh bless the Lord. That is greatness. He tears down your ambitions to lift you up in his. Humility is letting him do just that.

3. Let Him tear down your pride

The disciples were on their way to Capernaum when the dispute arose. Jesus was a way off and they began discussing it: greatness. They wondered, what does greatness look like? And we think about what it means to be a great Christian. What will this new era of Christ's reign look like? What great, magnificent churches will we be part of? We want something we can be proud of and we imagine that greatness looks something like this:

The church is packed. Wall to wall. They've found a way of ministry that has brought in more people in the last five years than any other church in America. They are so big they need a board of directors, and a public spokesman. They've gone from a storefront rental, to a small church building, to a large church building – and now they are so big that they are worshipping in a large theater. Their praise songs shake the halls. Their budget is through the roof. They just hired a consulting firm for \$20,000 to help them find their new pastor. His salary will be over \$100 grand. They try to stay

away from taking too strong a stand on doctrinal issues; their worship services are meant to leave people feeling good; feeling motivated; feeling like they have some real great ideas that they can put into practice. That is what greatness looks like.

And there we are, peering over the fence. And we sulk back inside, muttering to ourselves. We look at our Sunday School and see just 4 kids showing up, week after week. And so we contrive jealous thoughts. Judgmental thoughts. Wishing we had something better, but realizing we can't afford it.

But Jesus takes a little child from one little Sunday School. From one little class of just four kids, he takes one little preschooler and says, "Whoever receives one of these little children in My name receives Me; and whoever receives Me, receives not Me, but Him who sent Me." And he calls Sunday School teachers like Rene and Chris to do just that. To let the little children come to Jesus. That is greatness.

And that is what brings us down to earth. Face to face with the mat. Realizing, that while climbing, striving to become something better, compromising doctrine and making things a little more feel-good, what happens to the children? What happens to that little child, lost in the mix of colorful ads, songs, play time, agendas of grown ups. But that is why we come here today.

6 But He gives more grace. Therefore He says:

"God resists the proud,

But gives grace to the humble."

7 Therefore submit to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you. 8 Draw near to God and He will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners; and purify your hearts, you double-minded. 9 Lament and mourn and weep! Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom. 10 Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and He will lift you up.

But He gives us a gift. Drawing us to our knees and drawing us near to him. This is why we don't shuffle our children into day care while the adults worship. Because we as a congregation, draw near together. And this is for all ages. In the Divine Service of the Word and Sacrament, we draw near to God. We submit to him, and the devil can have no part with us. We lament, weeping over our sinfulness. Our laughter with the world is turned into mourning over our sinful ways. And he gives us a gift.

He gives more grace. More and more. He cleanses our hands and hearts. That is, both outwardly, and inwardly – He washes our bodies in the waters of baptism, and

cleanses our hearts in the blood of Christ. And He draws near to us. To be our personal God. Forgiving us through the word of the pastor and the distribution of the sacred elements. Water and bread and wine and word – it all comes together to lift us up to heaven. No longer is there a fence to keep God out, but he has come within us and lifts up our heart in prayer and faith. He forgives all our sins and jealously calls us his own. He tears down your pride, to lift you up in his grace.

So let's stop looking over the fence. There is nothing for us over there. Maybe you have lost your job. Or your spouse. Or something important to you. Or maybe you've been hurt; left out; left behind. Maybe you don't have the life you wish you did or the stuff your flesh so desires. So what? In the end, this is all that matters. The plaques on the wall; the political achievements; the numbers in your church – none of those things remain when we stand in the sight of God. Therefore submit to God; for he resists the proud and gives grace to the humble. He tears you down, so that He might lift you up. And he has. He has resurrected you in Christ Jesus to be heirs of eternal life. Amen.