

Simple Humility

Sermon Notes*

Joe Greemore: Sunday, September 25, 2011

Last week, we opened with a reminder of Noah's Ark, wondering, "So what if the ark was covered in pitch? Who cares how big it was or how wide? What does an ancient story have to do with my life today?" We must take care, lest we forfeit the interpretive tool we have at our disposal. Early in my biblical studies, I was instructed to "interpret the Bible by using the Bible." It is its own interpretive tool. If we were to take a look at the book of Exodus, where Moses' mother sets her boy adrift among the reeds of Aegypt in the midst of a hostile, alien environment, we would read that Jochebed lovingly covered that little reed basket, much the same way that God tenderly had the ark covered in pitch – so it would not sink. The pitch that was used here functioned as an inhibitor for water, sealing the boat, and the basket, from water leaking in.

Recently, I read about a small boat that had to stop every so often in the midst of a lake to empty out the water, then continue plodding along in its way. Can you imagine how much dumping of water Noah and his family would have had to do if they hadn't insulated that great boat from the floods that came? Noah and the ark might have been swept away in the flood of God's fury and wrath, just as the rest of the inhabitants of the earth.

It's not much fun to think of God as wrathful, is it? To picture a God who impunes judgment to the ones to whom it is due, who mercilessly and systematically wipes out whole indigent races, towns, children, even cattle. That paints a stark picture to the God of Jesus that you and I seek to worship. The God of the Old Testament is narrowly reconciled, if only in name, with the God of love you and I worship this morning. The God of the Old Testament spurns the prideful, arrogant oppressor and brings low those who lift themselves up high.

That sounds too foreign on our post-modern, individual, capitalist ears, doesn't it? I ask you, who wants to serve a God who takes away from those who want to get ahead in life? Who wants to worship a being who brings low those who have spent a lifetime getting ahead in life? Who wants a God who loves humility and despises the proud?

But that's not really a fair picture of God, is it? I mean, in the New Testament, we have this picture of God who gives to the servant who works hard to multiply his talents (Matthew 25) and takes away from the one who has only a little. We see a God who loves the just and the unjust, too (Matthew 5). And we see a lord who desires all to come to repentance and who is willing that none should perish... We serve a God who loves everybody, no matter their track record in life, no matter their station or current standing.

So why would humility make a difference? Is that old maxim, "Those who exalt themselves will be humbled and those who humble themselves will be exalted," still applicable. Jesus seemed to think so (Matthew 18, 23). He said, "Whoever does not humble himself like a little child will never see God's

kingdom.” And also, “Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.”

If you want to know that I think, I think we’re all destined for humility. I think it’s part of the human experience; I think it’s inevitable. The question is whether we come by it willingly, or not.

You’ve all heard the expression, “Humble pie.” To use it in a sentence, one might say, “When John knew he was wrong and that there was no way around it, he had to eat some humble pie.” We’re saying that John had to cut out a slice of humility, or humble himself, because he was wrong. Does that mean that only people who have been wrong will experience humility? Yes. I know plenty of people who have never been wrong in their entire life, and they’re wrong about that. You see, in Romans, Paul says, “All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.” That’s another way of saying we didn’t meet God’s perfection expectations. Why – because we’re human, and it’s part of who we are.

How many times have we heard of a sports player who made millions during their starstruck career, only to claim bankruptcy years later? How often have we heard of a leading company collapsing because of financial inconsistency? How many of you would like to be the head of Enron today? Twenty years ago maybe, but now, there’s nothing. Nothing but abasement and simple humility.

You see, we’re all going to deal with humility at some point in our life or afterward. When we’re judged for the deeds done in the body, either we’ll be blessed for living lives of humility, or we’ll be cursed for forgetting to eat humble pie.

We see an illustration of this in the story of the Lazarus and Dives. The rich man, named Dives, had plenty all his life and missed the opportunity to serve the poor man at his doorstep. Then he got to have his chance at torment when the die was cast, Lazarus had gone to heaven and Dives mourned his doleful existence in hell. He tried to warn his family, “Don’t do what I do – care for someone beyond yourself – look to the needs of other – be humble!” But Abraham, up in heaven, said, “They have the law and the prophets. Let them listen to them.”

This is only a story, an illustration that Jesus gives his disciples. It’s only a fable, right, a wise parable spoken from the words of a wise man? Jesus didn’t really mean that, if we live selfish, greedy lives, we might face eternal consequences right? I mean, he himself said, “The Son of Man came not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him.”

For me, the key lies in Jesus’ words about the children. Whoever does not humble himself and become like a little child will not enter the Kingdom of heaven.”

Have any of you seen the movie, “Kingdom of Heaven,” starring Orlando Bloom, that cute guy from Troy, Legolas in Lord of the Rings, and the immortal who never returned from the “Pirates of the Caribbean” series? Bloody movie. Gory. Gritty. Downright mean and nasty. If that movie is the best model of what God’s kingdom is like, who wants it, anyway? I think I’m happier to live a life of love on earth than to live an eternity of conflict.

The movie captures an interesting element of life: transition. At the end of the movie, the besieging army, led by Salahoudin, the infamous Arab, prevails. They elicit a surrender from the

defending Crusaders. But what happens afterward is even more interesting. They let them go. Men who had been struggling only hours before to wipe out the resistance of some straggling, desperate forces, show mercy. It is an act of humility on the part of the besieging army to allow the defenders safe passage away from the city, and it is an act of humility on the part of the knights and people to accept that gracious offer. What ensures, history tells us – and the movie was, of course, fictional based on actual historic events – is a constant struggle between peoples and armies, a movement toward occupation by whoever is strongest and most battle savvy, whoever has the most elite forces.

Kara Powell, PhD, at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, CA, has said that, “Balance is what happens between one extreme and another.” Think of that – take a pendulum, for example. It is only in the middle of its swing from one end of its migration to the other, that it, for an instant, achieves absolute balance. Then it is pulled on through to one extreme or the other, then back again. That seems to be the story of Jerusalem, now caught in an uneasy balance between alien forces, those who would seek to occupy, the oppressor, and the oppressed.

This week, the President of the Palestinian forces in Israel, despite resistance from the United States and Israel, submitted its bid for sovereignty to the United Nations. Palestine may soon become a nation again. Lands in and around the current state of Israel, lands that have been fought over for as long as the Bible is ancient, might begin to return to the hands of their original owners. Jerusalem, the picture of the tripartite soul, split between the passions, volition and ego of so many, lies at the fulcrum of the debate. Who will own what, whose land is whose? God said it’s mine – but you took it from my ancestors. We’ve been here since people came on the land, and we are the rightful heirs.

In Jewish tradition, there is the notion of a year of Jubilee, a year when the rights to land ownership return to the original owner. What happened to the Palestinians year of Jubilee? When do they get their land back? It’s interesting to note that, when Jesus was born in Galilee, he was a Palestinian, born in the Roman province of Palestine, under the control of the violent King Herod the Great.

This is not an argument about humility. It’s an argument about rights. In fact, it comes right down to human rights. Why isn’t the United States, one of the greatest human rights champions in the history of the world, championing the rights of poor, displaced and oppressed Palestinians in the Middle East? A close friend of mine, who recently returned from Palestine, shared that Palestinians are some of the most hospitable people she knows. She calls them her family, for so they call her. She said that the treatment of her family is abysmal; they have to put netting up overhead in their streets in order not to be covered in the rain of offal, rotten food and garbage frequently thrown out of the windows of angry, inhospitable neighbors.

If you’re thinking, that’s not a picture of humility, you’re right. To treat a neighbor as a lesser being is not an act of humility. To have to walk around the streets built on ground that belonged to your ancestors, that’s humility.

What does it mean to be humble? Anyone? The same Greek word from which we derive the word, ‘humble,’ also applies to a horse that has been trained for war. War horses aren’t very nice. A group of war horses is commonly referred to as Cavalry. Perhaps you’re reminded of the exploits of

Theodore Roosevelt and his rough riders, General Custer and his fallen regiment, or the hordes of native Americans that would ride, uninhibited, across the early plains. They all rode on horses, special horses, trained for battle, trained to follow their master's every command, even, especially, in the heat of battle. Today, we have another name for the things that constitute Cavalry: tanks. In the U.S. Army, we have light Cavalry and armored Cavalry vehicles, ranging from HMMWVs to the Abram's M1-A1 tank. Instruments of war, instruments of mass carnage and destruction, defensible steel walls on wheels protecting their valuable human assets within; I don't know about you, but typically, when I think of the world humble, I don't think of a tank.

It was said that a man on horseback was equivalent to ten men on foot in a combat setting. You could do a lot of damage with a good suit of armor and a well-trained horse. It was the training of the horse that we should note. A meek, or obedient - or humble - horse, was one that had been trained to run down a hill and stop at a command. The method of training was to use a bush on a sloped decline. The rider would ride the horse down the hill until just before the bush, then pull hard on the reins to tell the horse to stop. It was not until the horse could stop before the bush, not halfway through it, that the horse was deemed, humble.

Who wants to be a horse? Who wants to be horse-like? Well pastor, you just said we were supposed to be child-like; now you're asking who wants to be horse-like? This word, this mark of a humble, obedient spirit, was used to describe Jesus in our text from Philippians 2. Jesus, who humbled himself even unto death, became our ultimate example of obedience to God. Jesus, who said he came not to condemn, but to save, become our ultimate example of God's love. Jesus, who was exalted to the right hand of God, another way of saying a place of highest honor, became our ultimate pedagogy for humility. Not a tank, not a horse, not angry neighbors in a city, not a pendulum, not a wrathful angry God, but one who, like a tender, loving mother, gently paints our lives with strokes of love, acceptance, affirmation, comfort and safety.

Say more here about Jesus.

God is called, in the OT, a sanctuary, an ever-present help in trouble, a safe place. That's what Christ calls us to be. As we look into God's word, let us never lose our focus on other today. Let us never forget the tension, the turmoil and the injustice that exists in our time that we are called to do battle against. And let us never forget the love that leaves no stone unturned, no sinner to solitude, no heart untouched.

Let us remember the love that teaches us simple humility, to consider our neighbor better than ourselves, not to withhold justice, and to always clothe ourselves in the righteousness that comes from God.

Amen.

If today is your day to stand in an act of humility, to humble yourself in the sight of God and others, and to proclaim, "I want to join my neighbors at Calvary Baptist Church of Denver in serving others, loving

unconditionally, and following faithfully,” then let this time be a safe place and a sanctuary for you. Please stand now as we sing together, “We Are an Offering.”

Benediction – Benedictus, from benedicite, a latin word meaning, “Blessings to you,” I leave with you. When you are tempted to be foul and ill-tempered, perhaps like an angry war horse, may the hand of your master give you temperance and moderation. When you find yourself besieged by the raging, bombarding realities of life, may you find the wisdom to withstand and persevere. When your life is in peril and you are at your darkest moments, may the light of God’s love be lifted up upon you and illuminate your life to show the beauty of one of God’s beloved. Go in peace.

How is Jesus humble? What did he do to show us humility?

Nice use of present day examples.

Good to cite sources of biblical examples.

Jesus Christ is the quintessential apologetic of the Christian faith. We struggle because we want to entwine thousands of years of Judeo-Christian, monotheistic faith with believing in Jesus. Christ IS the word of God, sent to earth to deliver, not to condemn. Sent so that we might have a perfect example of God’s desire for humanity, fulfilled in Christ. Given so that we could learn to give. Desired so that we could learn true desire. Trusted that we might truly be trusted. Tried that we might be encouraged, killed that we might have life, and raised to eternal life that we might inherit the riches of God’s own mercy.

Now, I don’t know about you, but if you think that sounds a little too good to be true, I agree it does. If that seems like an impossible thing to believe, by George, it is! And if that sounds like a fancy tale made up by a bunch of desperate, half-witted disciples of a man who would turn the world upside down, it isn’t. This is the reality of God’s love for you and for me. It’s a gospel that gets in your face and demands an answer – or a cold shoulder. Jesus said, if you’re not with me, you’re against me. His words, works and will showed that he cared for the very least, the lost, and the oppressed, and that, more often than not, it was the well-educated, well-off and well-informed that got it all wrong. Christ came not for the healthy, but for the sick. Christ came not to destroy the haughty, but to lift up the lowly. Jesus Christ, the word of God made flesh, came that we might experience deliverance not from, but through, pain, evil and death. His *is* the ultimate example of non-violence, transformation of the unprivileged, and the humble becoming the popular hero. He was not what the Jews of the day expected. He is not what you or I suspect.

Picture a king, a lord of creation, wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger. That sounds like pure ridiculousness. Yet this is God's perfect example of love given to us, the picture of humble, lowly, common birth that would beget the Lord of life.

One of my favorite illustrations from my youth – and I can say that now that I'm 30 – is to take Jesus' words from the Sermon on the Mount, notably the Beatitudes, and to use them as a template not only for the kind of character that God desires, but for Jesus' character. Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. Blessed is Jesus, the meek, for he shall inherit the earth. Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven. Blessed is Jesus, who was poor in Spirit, for his is the Kingdom of Heaven.

We say that violence is at the heart of every major world religion. We say that religious systems are inherently violent. Maybe it's time we start become a little more unreligious and a little more like Jesus. Instead of focusing on our behavior, maybe we ought to pay a little more attention to God's grace. Instead of paying attention to what our neighbor's wearing, maybe we ought to be a little more concerned about clothing ourselves in love and righteousness – not to mention humility. Instead of focusing on what's going to happen to those who fall short of God's righteous commands, maybe we ought to spend some more time looking out for the fallen neighbor, picking them up and carrying them to safety.

In the prophet Micah, we are reminded of lovely, poetic words:

“He has shown you, o mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you, but to act justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God.”

Keep your eyes fixed on Jesus, the Author and Pioneer of your faith. Don't be discouraged when people tell you what's contrary to Christ's teaching. Follow on, persevere to the end, be bold and be very courageous.

This morning, I want to challenge you, Calvary Baptist Church of Denver, not 6500 E Girard Avenue, the building where so much ministry takes place, but the people, God's people, called and redeemed from among the darkness. Rise up, let your light shine and your glory be known to people. Give God to the glory in all your doings, and in your ways be justified. Show your love to your neighbor, step out of your comfort zone, down the street and into the path of the devil. Tell him to move on over to the other side of the road; Jesus' got some work to do here. Follow God's word, hold it out as a light in a dark place. Don't be afraid to follow the Spirit God put in that temple that is your body. For God's Spirit is living and active, God's word is alive in this place, and God willing, God's gonna pick you up and take you on to glory land – in a car called humility.

And what does God require of you? Simple; humility.

* These notes were used sparingly in the 1st service and not at all during the 2nd worship service.