

**July 16, 2017**

**Sermon: Practicing Humility**

**Texts: Matthew 23:1-13 and Philippians 2:1-11**

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A Quaker educator and writer, Parker Palmer, published a book some time ago, titled, *Let Your Life Speak*. In it, he tells the story of job offer he had received to become a college president. He was excited about the prospect, but uncertain about accepting it, so he met with a group of friends in what the Quakers call a “Clearness Committee”.

Their responsibility to him was simply to ask questions of him to help him clarify his own understanding of the issues at stake in his choice. At a certain point in the conversation, one member of the committee asked Parker what he thought he would *most enjoy* about the new position. Parker kept telling about all the things he would no longer need to do if he had the post. His friend said, “But, Parker, you are not answering my question. *What will you most enjoy about this new work?*”

Parker Palmer said he finally paused and discovered that his answer was, “*I will have my picture in the newspaper with the word ‘President’ underneath it.*” Maybe you can imagine the scene. There was an intake of breath around the circle, then a long silence.

Finally, the same friend asked, “*Parker, isn’t there a simpler way to get your picture in the paper?*” ///Parker said the entire circle of friends broke into laughter. And, after that, he knew what choice to make. He called the college to excuse himself from further consideration for the position of college president.

The reason there was laughter, and the reason that Parker suddenly knew what to do, was simply that the Gospel of Jesus, the mind of Christ, taught him two things simultaneously: first, it confronted his pride and vanity, and second, it offered him the path of humility. Parker gained insight into what it means to have “the mind of Christ” just the way the disciples did when Jesus spoke of the difference between the attitudes of the scribes and Pharisees, OR the attitudes of those who humble themselves before God and neighbor.

**Matthew 23** Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, <sup>2</sup> “The scribes and the Pharisees.... do all their deeds to be seen by others; for they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long. <sup>6</sup> They love to have the place of honor at banquets and the best seats in the synagogues, <sup>7</sup> and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have people call them rabbi. <sup>8</sup> But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all students... <sup>11</sup> The greatest among you will be your servant. <sup>12</sup> All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted.

This is the same word Paul shares with the church at Philippi: “In humility regard others as better than yourselves....have the mind of Christ.”

Perhaps you are wondering why we have a 12-step ladder in the chancel of the church today? ///The reason has to do with both pride and humility

This ladder reminds us of the ladder in Genesis 28 which Jacob saw going to heaven, and where angels were descending from God to earth, and ascending from the earth to heaven. *Christian* spiritual leaders have used this image for centuries to help us understand the human problem, the Parker Palmer problem, of pride and humility.

Now, Parker's first problem was the problem of pride and vanity. There is a ladder for that. In the 12<sup>th</sup> century, *almost a thousand years ago*, Bernard of Clairvaux, a Christian theologian, used the ladder to help people like Parker diagnose themselves when they were confused about their motives or their decisions. Bernard said, here is the image of a ladder with 12 steps, 12 steps of pridefulness, which tend to build on one another... deepening into a fixed attitude of presumption of one's superiority, revolt from God, and slavery to sin.

The twelve steps of pride were, first, curiosity: Not healthy curiosity, but curiosity that delves into things that are not good for us to know. Curiosity becomes tainted with pride when we cast all caution aside and let our explorations go wherever we want.

Curiosity tends toward “levity of mind”, a tendency to occupy the mind with inappropriate things, a tendency to become superficial. When we brush aside what is important to God and substitute our own foolish and trivial interests, we act in pride.

Levity leads to giddiness: With giddiness, we routinely over-emphasize lightweight experiences and situations at the expense of more meaningful and godly things. We want to be entertained and amused, rather than to exert ourselves in deeper prayer or harder service...

This contributes to boasting, and we are increasingly locked into our little world of idle thinking and foolish behavior, we begin to boast of foolish things. This leads to “singularity”; we may seek only our own counsel because we believe our insights so much higher than others’ .... From this comes the pride of Self-conceit: we find faults in others but fail to see them in ourselves....we presume; we even believe that we save ourselves.... We become our own self-justifiers. Even Jesus himself must now vacate the throne of our lives. We think that we can save ourselves and frankly, we think we do not need a lot of saving.

We admit our failures, but reluctantly and hypocritically because the appearance of humility is socially useful... Finally, we openly revolt against God and his lawful representatives; we reject any limits on our own

behaviors, and our particular patterns of sin become habitual, chronic and rationalized in our lives.

So those are the twelve steps of the ladder of pride. They end in narcissism, inauthenticity and the loss of any real trust in God. Disaster.

**There is another possibility for us, though.** Paul says of Christ Jesus in Philippians, “He emptied himself...taking the form of a servant...”

Benedict of Nursia, the founder of the Benedictine order, during the 6<sup>th</sup> century, *almost 1500 years ago*, also used the image of a ladder, but not for an unhealthy and prideful descent away from God. He called *his* ladder, “the ladder of humility”, and it also had 12 steps.

Gaining a God-inspired humility requires a daily “climb” toward God and with the people who accompany us in our lives—whether our children, parents, teachers or students, employers or employees, and so on. The rungs or steps are these:

**First Step, Step 1** Revering for God.

**Step 2** Doing God’s will – rejecting our own will and doing God’s will wins the crown.

**Step 3** Obeying others – because of our love for God, we submit to others in obedience.

**Step 4** Enduring afflictions – those who have faith must bear the costs of every disagreement or loss.

**Step 5** Confessing – We admit all our loveless thoughts and evil actions to God who forgives.

**Step 6** Being content in all things. We are to be content with the simplest and most basic things.

**Step 7** Believing and knowing that without God's grace we are all walking disaster areas.

**Step 8** Obeying the rules of the communities and organizations by which we live – home, church, government.

**Step 9** Withholding our tongue from speaking until we are asked.

**Step 10** Avoiding useless laughter, mocking or trivializing life's concerns...not foolish in behavior.

**Step 11** Speaking with few and sensible words, gently, and not with a loud voice.

**Step 12** Appearing modest in attitude and possessions, not putting ourselves on display for social applause.

So whatever in you is vainly longing for a proud life, like the one that tempted Parker Palmer, it is time to begin to climb this rather different ladder, the ladder of Christ's humility and service. The Christian father, Chrysostom, wrote in comment on experiences like these, like ours: "If you are in love with precedence and the highest honor, then try this, instead: pursue the things in last place, pursue being valued least of all, pursue being lowliest of all, pursue being smallest of all, pursue placing yourself behind others."

Put on the mind of Christ.