

“Humility”

Valley Presbyterian Church – July 14, 2019

5th Sunday after Pentecost

Psalm 8

Rev. John Wahl

Matthew 20:29-34

The 8th Psalm tells us that human beings have been created a little lower than God. This means that we are endowed by our Creator with much to be responsible for – including the beasts of the field, birds of the air, and fish of the sea. And yet, God is always and everywhere the One who acts in this psalm: crowning us with glory and honor and placing the other creatures under our authority. It is God and God alone who sets the moon and the stars in their place and gives us our breath and life.

Still, human beings are not completely passive. The psalm reminds us, first, that we can see: “When I look at the work of your fingers...” The result of sight is the appreciation of God’s majesty which is manifest in creation: whether it is high mountains or peaceful waters; beautiful melodies or colorful flowers. This leads to the second, all-important human activity described: speaking God’s praise; as in the initial and final words of the psalm: “O Lord, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth!” We perceive God’s glory revealed in creation and so give praise to God.¹

Even if we acknowledge God as the agent of creation, we often don’t act that way. In today’s world, humility is rarely seen as a valued character trait; instead, we are taught to toot our own horn, to pave the way to our own futures, to take the reins and make our own breaks. Being humble is seen as being passive, timid and meek. And yet, it is an important part of our faith tradition, and one of the most important – if misunderstood – principles that stands behind our journey of discipleship in Christ.

This summer, we have been testing the assumption that recovery is one modern-day way to talk about the Christian idea of salvation; for discovering the healing and wholeness that God has created us to live out. In this examination of the 12 Steps of the recovery process, we have arrived at the 7th Step: *Humbly asked God to remove our shortcomings.*

¹ Paul Cho from *WorkingPreacher.com*

Last week, we looked at the serenity prayer as a guide to understanding the 12 steps – that we should seek to accept the things we cannot change, change the things we can, and have the wisdom to know the difference between the two. Serenity, according to Terrence Gorski, is the ability to accept ourselves fully; in all of our strengths and weaknesses.² There are some things in our lives that we are able to control – indeed, that God given to us as our responsibilities – while other things or other people are meant to be beyond our control. Thus, we need to prioritize not only what we can do, but also what we want our lives to consist of: will we choose to put time and energy into those things we can, and should, control; and thus resist spending our time and energy in those places and people that we're not meant to control?

The 7th Step is about asking God – in humility – to be in control of removing from us our shortcomings, our weaknesses, the ways we have missed the mark. Christians sometimes wonder why Jesus would tell us to ask God to help us, and then reassure us that God already knows our needs even before we ask. The answer is that we ask not in order to change God, but to change ourselves; we pray, not in order to alert God of what we need done, but so that we might better understand what God has, can, and will do in our lives.

In the lesson today from Matthew, we hear about an encounter between Jesus and two blind men on the side of the road. In Luke's telling of this story, it is not two blind men, but one; and he is given a name: Bartimaeus. But, in both cases, the story goes about the same. As Jesus is passing by, the blind shout out to him, pleading for mercy. The people in the crowd tell them to be quiet, but they only shout out louder. Jesus stops, and summons the two to him, asking, "what do you want me to do for you?" Their answer is clear, "Lord, let our eyes be opened." Moved by compassion, Jesus touches them and they are healed; immediately, we are told, they follow him.

These blind men – whether Bartimaeus in Luke or the two that are unnamed by Matthew – are often held up as exemplars of faith; persistently calling out to Jesus and believing that they could be healed of their blindness, despite the urgings of the crowd that they be silent. This turns out not just to be a healing story, a physical miracle, but also a call story: while their blindness had relegated them to sitting on the side of the road, now they decide to follow Jesus as he walks along the road; after accepting what they could not change – allowing themselves instead

² Terrence Gorski, *Understanding the Twelve Steps*

to be changed by Jesus – they came to recognize what they could change; showing wisdom in knowing the difference between the two.³

At first, this might not seem to us like a story about humility. The blind men, after all, shout out Jesus and – after being asked by the crowd be silent – shout out again even louder. They are not being meek or timid. But, that is not what true humility means. Instead, God is asking for us to come asking. God knows that sometimes we need to change in ways that we can't change ourselves – whether that means healing from some physical ailment, or ridding ourselves of an addiction, or overcoming a spiritual, psychological or emotional challenge. When we are able to ask, it shows that we do not feel entitled to experience change, but are willing to recognize and accept God's mercy.

It is probably not a coincidence that the blind men in the gospel story were sitting along the side of the road, because it was not uncommon for those with ailments to be beggars. Maybe that is why those in the crowd were trying to silence them; they wanted to tune out the voices of the beggars and assumed that Jesus wouldn't want to be bothered by them. And yet, as God's Son, Jesus hears the cries of the needy and is moved by compassion to take action on their behalf.

Sometimes, we feel like we are being told to be silent. Whether by individual persons or the collective voice of society, we can get the impression that our challenges and problems are our own fault; something we should be able to change on our own; and thus not an appropriate or welcome conversation topic. By either hard work or clean living or wise choices, we come to think that we should be able to take care of ourselves, protect ourselves, and heal ourselves. When self-sufficiency and independence are seen as the highest virtues, calling out for help is discouraged; if not disparaged.

But true humility is not about independence, but interdependence. As followers of Jesus, we are meant to rely both on God and on other people; and as people in recovery programs learn, it is impossible to fully heal yourself. Surrendering – admitting that we have weaknesses and humbly asking God to remove them – does not mean that God or other people will do the changing for you, it means that people were created to be in relationship with and reliant upon each other in order to change.

Many of the world's most devout religious followers – whether Buddhist or Franciscan, for example – willingly place themselves in the role of beggars: to be

³ Mark Hoffman from *WorkingPreacher.com*

completely reliant on the compassion of others.⁴ And like the blind men on the side of the road, they do not allow themselves to be silenced, but proclaim the importance of relationship with God and others for living a life of healing and wholeness.

What this means for us is that we need to make decisions about what is worth living for. We cannot be all things to all people – no-one has the time, energy or capacity to do that – all of us have our own particular shortcomings; nor can we let ourselves be silenced by those people or messages that tell us that our voices – and our needs – are not worthy of being heard.

And so, Jesus teaches us to ask: not because God doesn't already know what we need, but because our voices need to be heard. For, if we do not ask, then we may not know what it is that we are living for; to whom and what we are going to devote our energy and attention; what it is that we can change ourselves and what we need God and others help us to change. If we do not ask, we will likely remain stuck in some of the same patterns and habits that we have tried, time and again, but are not working for us.

If our only method of change is doing it ourselves, we are likely to replace one bad habit with another and fail to break away from what Richard Rohr calls 'stinking thinking.' We trust instead that the way God changes us is to remove what is false and replace it with what is true. For just as we all have weaknesses, God has also created us with strengths; as the 8th Psalm says, each of us is made just "a little lower than God," and so we have the same capacities for compassion and love that God in Christ reveals to us.

Therefore, we ask ourselves: whose voices are shouting out that need to be heard? Who is Jesus calling from the roadside to come to him through his body, the church? Where does compassion, healing, and love need to take place? We have been given great responsibility; and knowing this, how can we be anything but humble in asking God to change us and make us whole? AMEN.

⁴ Richard Rohr, *Breathing Under Water*