

Humble Service

Matthew 18:1-5, Luke 22:24-27

Well, today it all begins. No, I'm not talking about our fall church schedule, but the football season. It will be the Philadelphia Eagles and the Cleveland Browns at 1:00 today. All the Eagles fans are anxious to see how Carson Wentz is going to do as the new Eagles' quarterback. Of course every pastor hopes that football won't get in the way of church attendance. (Like this church cartoon)

Or as one man said to his wife: "If God wanted me to go to church he wouldn't have put football on Sundays."

Erma Bombeck is quoted as saying: If a husband watches more than 3 football games a week the wife should have him declared legally dead and have his estate probated. Well let the season begin and on with the sermon. Speaking of dying:

These two men had died and were waiting at the Pearly Gates for admission into heaven. After a while St. Peter came out to meet them and said to them: "We've only got room for one more person, so I have to ask you: "Which one of you is the more humble?"

Well, you know that would put you in a tough predicament. I mean, humility is a virtue that's kind of hard to brag about. What can you say to boost your case? But who really wants to be humble in this day and age anyway? We live in a day of self-glorification. A day when its important to assert your own needs and wants. To do my own thing. I have my rights and if I have to I will demand them. I'm not saying there isn't a place to standing up for yourself, but when it comes to humility it usually ends up on the back shelf. I'm reminded of that song that people used to sing: "O Lord, its hard to be humble, when you're perfect in every way." It's a comical song, would be funny, but the sad part is that it often reflects an attitude common in our society. Nobody wants to be humble. The message we hear today...on tv, on social media, wherever. "You deserve more than you're getting. You got to look out for yourself. You need to fight for your rights." Simply put the message is: make sure you look out for #1, take care of yourself, please and satisfy yourself. It has become a part of who

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we are as a society. I mean there's always been selfishness, its part of our sinful nature, but now people often flaunt it and are proud of it. Don't get me wrong, there is such a thing as self-care and we do need to make sure we attend to taking care of ourselves. But what I'm talking about is an attitude that puts self above others to the point of ignoring the needs of others.

I was thinking about some of the symbols we use to communicate who we are and how they reflect what our values are: Of course there's the financial symbols, the dollar sign, Stock market signs. There's the symbol of the golden arches and other fast-food establishments which point to our fast paced society. There are symbols of our advertising and marketing groups that portray we are a pleasure-seeking society. There are hundreds of icons and emojis on our phone from maps to games, reflecting what is most important to us.

These are not all bad things, but they say a lot about us, who we are, what we value, what we want to invest our time in. We are often influenced by these values to the point where our way of thinking and living is deeply affected.

And then we hear the call of Jesus. The call that's asking us to stop, to pause long enough to hear and to listen to another way of life. To follow Jesus, to be his disciple, it's a call upon our lives that asks us to discover that we are meant to set ourselves apart from these symbols of the world and to follow Christ. Isn't that what Pastor Hey Young was preaching about last weekend when she spoke of the church. What did Jesus mean by the church? Not a building, not an institution, not even coming to worship, but being the church, living as Christ's disciples in the world. That people might see Jesus in us.

We are not called to follow the symbols of the world, but instead as followers of Jesus, we have different symbols to live by. And two of the most powerful symbols for the Christian are these: the cross and the towel and basin. Just think about it. What do these symbols represent for us? The cross speaks of sacrifice, the towel and basin speak of service. In the one we are reminded of the offering of one's life for all humanity going even to the point of death. In the other we are reminded of the significance of servanthood as Jesus humbly bowed before his disciples and washed their feet. Picture those two symbols:

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the cross, the towel and basin. These two symbols sum up how we are called to live. Two essential characteristics, very foreign to the creed of society.

And what you come to realize is this : both require humility. Listen to how the book of Philippians describes the ministry of Jesus and the symbol of the cross: “And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death on a cross.” Going to the cross, he surrendered human will and followed God’s will. As he cried in the Garden of Gethsemene: “Not my will, but your will be done.” To be a follower of Jesus is to go the way of the cross. Listen to Jesus instruction: “ If any would want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me.” The symbol of the cross is connected to self-denial. I suppose a lot of us are uncomfortable with the term “self-denial”. Maybe that’s because we think that it means “self-contempt.” When you talk about self-contempt you claim you have no self-worth, or we try to deny or reject any sense of self-worth in us. But self-denial is different. Self-denial declares that we are of infinite worth and shows us how to realize it. Look at it this way: Self-denial is not denying our worth or our identity, it is simply freeing us from having to have our own way. It is learning the way of humility. It becomes for us a liberating, life-changing experience where I don’t have to demand my rights in order to be fulfilled. It calls me to let go of my agenda and focus on the needs of others. That’s why in this same passage in Philippians, the apostle Paul would challenge us to think differently: “Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.” (Phil.2:3-5)

Isn’t it interesting that Jesus compared this attitude of how to approach life to the approach a child might take. And so he calls a child before them to emphasis this quality. He asks the question: “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” And he calls a little child and has him stand among them. “I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” A little child who can be much more non-assuming than we adults. For we’ve had it drilled in our heads that unless

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we push ourselves ahead of others, we will never get ahead in life. But a little child who is very dependent on others to have its needs met. It is this characteristic of humility that Jesus says makes up God's kingdom. I know we have a hard time with this one. We often want to demand our own way. Or serve God on our terms, or when its' convenient.

Two symbols for the follower of Jesus: The cross and the towel and basin. Where the cross speaks of self-denial and sacrifice, the towel and basin speak of service. You have this beautiful example of the Savior of the World, stooping to wash his disciples' dirty feet. The disciples who were angry among themselves after that Last Supper, they're arguing about who was going to be the greatest in God's kingdom. And then Jesus makes it clear: "The greatest should be the the youngest and the one who rules like the one who serves. I am among you as one who serves.

Do you see it? Humility and service...they go together. Humility is one of those virtues that is never gained by seeking it. You don't get the gold medal for being the most humble. But there is something we can do to gain humility. That something is learning to serve. Serving others is most conducive to the growth of a humble spirit. You see our spirit often fights for honor and recognition. But serving the Lord, for the purpose of glorifying the Lord rather than oneself develops a humble attitude. And there develops within us that deep sense of joy that comes from going from having to have our own way to finding fulfillment in meeting the needs of others. That is called humble service. It is truly following the symbols of the cross and the towel and basin.

I came across a story about a church getting ready for worship service on a cold winter day. The parking lot was filling up quickly. One of the members told the story. He said: "I noticed as I got out of my car, that fellow members were whispering among themselves as they walked into church. As I got closer, I saw a man leaned up against the wall outside the church. He was almost lying down as if he were asleep. He had on a long trench coat that was almost in shreds and a hat topped his head, so you really couldn't see his face. He wore shoes that looked 30 years old, too small for his feet, with hole all over them and his toes

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stuck out. I assumed this man was homeless, and asleep, so I walked through the doors of the church. We all fellowshiped for a few minutes and someone brought up the man lying outside. People snickered and gossiped but no one bothered to ask him to come in out of the cold, including me. A few minutes later the church began. We all waited for the pastor to take his place at the pulpit, when the doors of the church opened. In came this homeless man walking down the aisle with his head down. People gasped and made faces. He made his way down the aisle and up to the pulpit where he took off his hat and coat. My heart sank, It was our pastor. He was the “homeless man” No one said a word. The pastor took out his Bible and laid it in front of him. And stated: “Well, folks, I don’t think I have to tell you what I’m preaching about today.”

This past week attention was focused on Mother Teresa who was canonized as a saint in the Catholic church. Pope Francis shared these words that highlighted the kind of life she led: “Mother Teresa, in all aspects of her life, was a generous dispenser of divine mercy, She bowed down before those who were spent, left to die on the side of the road, seeing in them their God-given dignity; For Mother Teresa, mercy was the “salt” which gave flavor to her work, it was the “light” which shone in the darkness of the many who no longer had tears to shed for their poverty and suffering. May this tireless worker of mercy help us increasingly to understand that our only criterion for action is gratuitous love, free from every ideology and all obligations, offered freely to everyone without distinction of language, culture, race or religion.”

You and I are challenged and called to live above the symbols of the world. Our calling is different than that of the world. For we are called to follow Jesus. For he came to reach the lost, the troubled, the hurting of this world and by his sacrificial love shown on the cross and by his tireless serving gave us the example to be his humble servants.

Closing hymn: The Summons (Last verse) Lord, your summons echoes true when you but call my name. Let me turn and follow you and never be the same. In your company I’ll go where your love and footsteps show. Thus I’ll move and live and grow in you and you in me.”