

Humility Makes Us Real

Matthew 20: 1-16

Jonah 3: 10- 4:11

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Matthew 20: 1-16

“For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. When he went out about nine o’clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace; and he said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.’ So they went.

When he went out again about noon and about three o’clock, he did the same. And about five o’clock he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, ‘Why are you standing here idle all day?’ They said to him, ‘Because no one has hired us.’ He said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard.’

When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, ‘Call the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first.’ When those hired about five o’clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage.

And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, saying, ‘These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.’ But he replied to one of them, ‘Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?’ So the last will be first, and the first will be last.”

Jonah 3: 10- 4:11

When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it. But this was very displeasing to Jonah, and he became angry. He prayed to the Lord and said, “O Lord! Is not this what I said while I was still in my own country? That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing. And now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live.” And the Lord said, “Is it right for you to be angry?”

Then Jonah went out of the city and sat down east of the city, and made a booth for himself there. He sat under it in the shade, waiting to see what would become of the city. The Lord God appointed a bush, and made it come up over Jonah, to give shade over his head, to save him from his discomfort; so Jonah was very happy about the bush. But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the bush, so that it withered.

When the sun rose, God prepared a sultry east wind, and the sun beat down on the head of Jonah so that he was faint and asked that he might die. He said, “It is better for me to die than to live.” But God said to Jonah, “Is it right for you to be angry about the bush?” And he said, “Yes, angry enough to die.”

Then the Lord said, “You are concerned about the bush, for which you did not labor and which you did not grow; it came into being in a night and perished in a night. And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?”

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On a recent Tues evening I set out for a hike with a mixed age group to climb Pack Monadnock in Peterborough, and what I came home with was a sermon illustration on humility.

Over the past several months I have had the opportunity to hike different trails in the area, and have really enjoyed the views and the accomplishments. Having climbed the 3 miles to the summit of Mt Willard recently I certainly felt prepared for Pack Monadnock, which is not quite as high nor as long. However, what I was not prepared for was the scramble, the very steep and rocky slope to begin the hike. Hands and feet bring you higher and higher over the rough ground, and it is quite a workout. Before I even completed the scramble, I was breathing hard and falling behind the group. They graciously and patiently waited for me to catch up, and then catch my breath before continuing on. But by the time I was nearly a mile in, I was done. They were all enjoying themselves, and I was on an endurance track in comparison.

This began a short stint of mental ping-pong, wanting to believe that if I just pushed myself harder that I could do this, that it wasn't something so different from what I have been doing. But there was also the recognition that I was holding the group back, that the scramble that had just about knocked the wind out of me was something they had all been experienced at so they were easily ready to continue, while I was feeling like a rag doll. This would have been one thing to push myself if I was alone, but a completely different thing, a wrong thing, to hold the whole group back.

This suddenly became clear to me that I was in a pride vs. humility moment. I wanted to go on, wanted to see this through and not quit, but not at the expense of the group who were all more experienced than I am. I bowed out, and turned back, and worked my way back down the scramble.

Long ago my Dad had said that one of the things he had admired about me was that I don't quit, don't give up, that I persist. But we both also recognized that such persistence is a two edged sword. Pushing through regardless of the hurdles can be pride, hubris, much more than it can be wanting to humbly, responsibly, follow through on a task that had been started.

Monk, theologian and writer Thomas Merton wisely said, “Pride makes us artificial; humility makes us real.” Pride can lead us to think that we are better than we really are as it places a veil over our real, authentic self. Humility makes us honestly realize what our strengths and weaknesses are. Humility allows us to recognize our own limits, and accept them, while also allowing others to have theirs. Pride wanted me to push on with the hike, humility let me back off, let me accept my limits without being jealous, envious of the other hikers' abilities, skills and enjoyment.

Humility is considered a prominent religious grace, and a meta-virtue as it crosses into a host of ethical characteristics. Can there really be authenticity without humility? Can there be fairness without humility? Can there be forgiveness without humility? Can there be gratitude without humility? Can there be equality without humility? Can there be compassion without humility?

When we allow ourselves to approach a situation from a place of humility, we open up new possibilities. We choose open-mindedness over protecting our own perspective, we can be

open to what others have to offer or teach us. We stop pushing our own view to allow another's in. Humility lets us share credit, and it reminds that we each have our own concerns, limits and baggage, whether or not they are shared aloud. We see that we can swallow our pride, and that it does not taste so bad after all.

Can there be *equality* without humility? The vineyard laborers worked varying amounts of time under the scorching hot sun, toiling and sweating. Some were there for 10 hours, some as little as 1 hour, yet to the surprise of all, each received the same wages. It was as the landowner said, "I will pay you whatever is right."

It's easy to see why those who had worked long and hard were angry and bitter at the equal pay. In their eyes they had been volunteers for 9 hours of a 10 hour day. They felt insulted, used, disrespected and robbed.

The landowner responded to their grumbling from a humbling point of view. Each worker had agreed ahead of time to the wages, and as the owner the pay was his to determine. He did not look at the workers equally in the amount of time worked on a particular day, but rather saw them as men with families at home who needed food on the table, who had bills to pay and needs to meet, whether or not they worked all day or stood in the marketplace anxiously awaiting to be hired. This was the equality priority of the landowner, a humbling position for the long time laborers, and an encouragement for the short time workers. Without humility, some men would have had to go home with too little after hours standing, waiting, in the scorching sun for an opportunity.

Rather than allowing the short time workers to be hurt, offended by the angry long term workers, the landowner encouraged them to invite in curiosity, to think about the time of frustrating and waiting, to show humility and patience as they would want to be shown.

How can we be the long time workers, how can we see our work as a way of caring for, and supporting, those who do not labor, those who cannot be, as employed. Can we see their desire, their needs, even as the sweat drips down our faces in the toiling sun?

In this time of a seemingly endless pandemic we know well many who are not able to work as Covid has closed, or limited, their jobs, yet they toil in the heat of anxiety, of financial worry, of lost opportunities.

How can we be the short time workers, faithfully and patiently waiting for relief to meet our needs, while appreciating those who work in unpleasant, or even dangerous jobs on our behalf, and be humbled by their efforts?

Can there be *compassion* without humility? Poor Jonah. He just could not catch a break. He endured tremendous hardships, survived the belly of a whale, journeyed to a foreign city with news no one wanted to hear, all because God demanded this of him. 'And for what', Jonah cried out to God, as his time, pain and work were all for nothing as God compassionately offered forgiveness to the repentant Ninevites. In anger, Jonah camped out near Nineveh, hoping the people who had been spared would fall back to their old ways, and then God would bring upon them all that Jonah had been called to prophecy. Instead, God used this opportunity to humble Jonah. God offered him cool shade for his waiting, but then quickly it was withered by a worm. Wind and blazing sunlight beat down on Jonah as he persisted in waiting for the Ninevites to fail. Jonah suffered from the heat, and told God that he was angry enough to die, yet he was determined to see Nineveh fall. God humbled Jonah, calling him to see that compassion was the greatest gift that God could offer, and that Jonah had had a hand in offering that gift.

Jonah is not the first nor the last to be humbled by God. Anyone of us could be camped out on the edge, out on the sidelines, waiting for someone to fail, for something to fall apart,

something that would allow us to say, 'I told you so.' Yet God can instead use that moment to humble us, to invite us to have a hand in redeeming, in healing, in helping, to offer compassion rather than arrogance.

With the worldview that surrounds us, we can see through the eyes of the vineyard laborers who felt cheated, we can share in Jonah's frustration and anger, but God calls us to see through humbled eyes, to see the world in the way that God envisions it. In God eyes we ourselves are the eleventh hour workers, the Ninevites, and by remembering that grace, then in humility we can offer it to others as well. We can offer that to those scrambling hand and foot to climb the rough ground of a mountain of challenges. We can be grateful for those who toil under the blaring heat of difficult, dangerous, work on our behalf. We can offer to choose living over protection, anger, irritation, worry and fear. We can be engaged and pick life goals that align with our values and what we see as our purpose as humility makes us real. Amen.