

“It is hard to say what is wrong with someone without sounding superior. Even Jesus can’t avoid that catch-22. When Jesus starts talking about what’s wrong with the Pharisees’ conduct he begins to sound like...” all the other preachers coming through town.ⁱ He tells the crowd they need to listen to the teachings of the Pharisees – for they teach the Torah – but he also tells them not to follow the Pharisees in what they do, because they do not ‘walk the talk.’ The Pharisees are all talk and no show. “They like to talk about compassion, but they don’t show any compassion.”

Jesus points out that they are also interested in the religious ceremonies but manage to create exemptions for themselves from the very obligations they impose. And then when they do fulfill their religious obligations they are quick to get good press for it. They like to be recognized and have their good deeds acknowledged. When it’s all said, Jesus does not paint these Pharisees as people to emulate even while he commends their teachings.

Jesus is all about teaching his disciples how to live in the kingdom of God...the kingdom that is coming into being by his very presence... And those who recognize Jesus as the one who has come to bring the kingdom of God also discover that a lot of things have changed – are changing. New language, new relationships and new attitudes leap off the pages of this gospel. God is our Father, our creator, and as such, we are all sisters and brothers to each other. We become sisters and brothers in Christ. Jesus is our Lord and Savior, the rabbi and teacher, and as such we do not call anybody else master. And, there is a new attitude – an important quality in a disciple – the quality of humility. In the kingdom of God those who exalt themselves will be humbled, the gospel tells us.

Those who desire to be great will be servants of all. It is a powerful message, a profound invitation. “The primary quality of those who are citizens in the kingdom of God will be the quality of humility.” How do we wrap our minds around this message this morning? Trying to define or describe humility can seem a bit like that catch-22. One preacher says, “It is a humility that comes from the honest recognition of two major realities: that we have been blessed with more than we ever deserve; and the immense obligation to preserve and pass on all that others have given us.” We are called to be humble servants for the sake of the gospel, to be “humbled by the sheer volume of grace, blessings and gifts given to us.” ...and to accept responsibility for passing on those gifts.

For me, I have found the most helpful way to begin understanding what humility means is to substitute the word honesty. And, that to discover humility, the starting place is with an honest examination of our lives. There is no easier, softer way in today’s message. Take an honest look at your selves, Jesus says. And what will we find: our complete and utter dependence in every respect imaginable – and that it is all an inheritance. We are not self-made. We are God’s handiwork. The point here is that when we take an honest assessment of who we are, what we have been given, the blessings in our lives, we have to admit that there is very little for us to be arrogant about. Here is what I read this week, “For it is not too much to say that there is no good, or beautiful or healthy thing in this world that does not depend for its origin and continued existence on the well-being of a whole host of others besides itself.”

I find myself distracted by the word humiliation. Its synonyms: disgrace, shame, embarrassment. Most of us go out of our way to avoid such experiences I imagine, unless we are driven by a compulsion or by an addiction that leads us there time again. But, maybe there is something to my distraction because in a sense we may only grow into the humility Jesus is speaking of when we are willing to take a hard look at ourselves and reach out for help when we need to – this is the honesty I believe we are called to – here in the coming of God’s kingdom. Looking at ourselves and getting help when we need to..., we might even discover that our problems are not even unique... And

then there are those times when we feel like we do not have what we need or things are not going the way we want them to – and then honesty can help us through that one too. For many of us perhaps it does not come easily to take a look at ourselves, that’s why I recommend helpers and friends. Most of us have hard things at some time in our life to deal with – and why say all this – because God is *not* calling us to humiliation, shame or self-hatred. Rather, God is calling us to honestly examine our lives so we can see all that God has done, and is doing, for us – that we are not alone, that we do have what we need, that God’s grace is sufficient for us. God invites us to recognize all “the amazing blessings, contributions and legacies, and gifts that have been given...” to us.

Humility and gratitude go hand-in-hand. And they lead us to care for one another, to care for others, to take care of the gifts given to us. This is how the community of Jesus grows. We share with one another, honest sharing, sharing that builds trust and strengthens hope. And with hope we are back full circle to gratitude. Honesty, gratitude, trust and hope – this is what Jesus invites us into today - it is a powerful message about how things are in the kingdom of God, and how we are called to live in relationship with one another.

I long for the hope that comes from honesty and gratitude, I long for the coming of God’s kingdom... where we are striving to understand Christ’s teaching, and we are seeking to live by them as well. And lest we forget that this is not for the sole purpose of our feeling good – the heart of the humble servant is for God’s presence to be where the light shines. With humility in our hearts, we take up the responsibility for preserving the good gifts we’ve been given and for giving them away. “The blessing of being God’s covenant people,” one writer says, “is not just so that we may enjoy the covenant; it is always for the joy of sharing it and passing it on.”

Now I realize there are risks at every step along the way – the risk that we may be made different – when we are honest things might change, when we giving things might change, when we put other’s first we might change. It’s a risk that I dare say will be worth taking – for the gratitude and hope will surpass our understanding.

It’s a serious and powerful message – Jesus invites us to examine our lives with honesty, to become his humble servants through our overwhelming gratitude for all God’s blessings, and to delight in sharing these blessings with others.

I pray – for us – In the words from scripture – Glory to God whose power working in us can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine, Glory to God from generation to generation in the church, in Christ Jesus, our Lord.

¹ “Humble Servant” a sermon by Rick Brand, in *Lectionary Homiletics*, November 2002, pages 6-7.