

## *Humility*

**2 Kings 5:11-13** <sup>11</sup> But Naaman became angry and went away, saying, "I thought that for me he would surely come out, and stand and call on the name of the LORD his God, and would wave his hand over the spot, and cure the leprosy! <sup>12</sup> Are not Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? Could I not wash in them, and be clean?" He turned and went away in a rage. <sup>13</sup> But his servants approached and said to him, "Father, if the prophet had commanded you to do something difficult, would you not have done it? How much more, when all he said to you was, 'Wash, and be clean?'"

**Colossians 3:11-14** <sup>11</sup> In that renewal there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all! <sup>12</sup> As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. <sup>13</sup> Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. <sup>14</sup> Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.

**Matthew 23:1-12** Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, <sup>2</sup> "The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat; <sup>3</sup> therefore, do whatever they teach you and follow it; but do not do as they do, for they do not practice what they teach. <sup>4</sup> They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others; but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them. <sup>5</sup> They 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>9</sup> And call no one your father on earth, for you have one Father-- the one in heaven. <sup>10</sup> Nor are you to be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Messiah. <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.

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Naaman was the five-star general of the army of Aram. His only superior was the king. Naaman had servants to set up his tent, feed his horse, cook his food, and polish his boots. As commander of the army, he was used to telling people what to do. When he said "Jump," people were supposed to ask "How high?" on the way up! But he had a problem. He suffered from the heartbreak of psoriasis. His skin was red and scabby. His wife was afraid that he was contagious and she was afraid to even come near him. He could see how people would glance sideways at his skin condition. It was bad for his image as a VIP!

A household servant girl told his wife that there was a prophet in Israel who could cure his skin condition. Naaman went through channels (yes, bureaucracy existed in antiquity) and eventually pulled up to Elisha's house with his retinue of servants, personal guards, and a bunch of expensive gifts to pay for his cure. Elisha, the prophet, sent a messenger out to tell Naaman to go wash in the Jordan River, which wasn't much more than a muddy creek. At this point Naaman got mad. He was used to being shown some respect, but Elisha had sent out some nobody to tell him to go take a bath in a muddy creek. Naaman expected personal service, some impressive ceremony, and an instant cure on the spot. Instead he was being sent off like a servant, told to travel to an insignificant river, and to dip himself in the muddy water seven times. Go away. Take care of it yourself. Naaman was a proud man and he wasn't getting the fawning personal attention that he deserved. This was lousy customer service. He wanted a cure worthy of his position. If his servants hadn't calmed him down and coddled him into traveling to the Jordan River, Naaman never would have been healed. His pride almost kept him from being cured.

It's a common failing to slip into the sin of pride. We can easily begin to feel like all of our abilities and the things we accomplish using our talents are all our doing. We believe that we deserve recognition for the position that we've achieved. Naaman was very blessed with leadership skills, tactical skill, and courage. He had gone from being grateful for his talents to being proud of his accomplishments. He had become a

"legend in his own mind." As a minister I heard recently would have put it, he had gone from being "blessed up" to being "messed up."

In today's gospel lesson Jesus is once again talking about the scribes and the Pharisees. Because it's easy to get a mistaken impression of them, we need to understand who these people were. The Pharisee movement began during the Greek occupation of Israel a few hundred years before Christ. By the time of Jesus, the religious aristocracy was the Sadducees. They controlled the high priesthood by cooperating with the Roman authorities. The Pharisees were separatists, that is, they wanted to be pure in faith and uncorrupted by Roman pagan influence. In a time of compromise with occupying forces, the Pharisees were an earnest lay movement that sought to be reformers who cared deeply about the implications of the Law of Moses.<sup>1</sup> Few of them had any formal training in Jewish law and scripture. (There are parallels today in super strict subgroups, largely lay driven, in various churches.)

We're likely to overlook the first thing Jesus said in this passage. <sup>2</sup> "The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat; <sup>3</sup> therefore, do whatever they teach you and follow it;" They sit on Moses' seat. That's an odd expression to our ears. When we remember that in those days a teacher would sit down to teach, then it may well be that Jesus is saying, "They teach what Moses taught." We recall that Jesus said in another passage that he didn't come to abolish the law, but to fulfill it. So, we really ought not be surprised that Jesus said, "Do whatever they teach you and follow it."

After supporting and affirming the teaching of the Pharisees, Jesus begins to criticize them. Don't do what they do, because they don't practice what they preach. Besides that, they put additional burdens on people because of the way that they interpret the law. The Pharisees, in their enthusiasm for righteousness, extended certain aspects of the Law that applied to the priests and the Levites, and applied them to everybody. That way, they reasoned, we'll be extra pure and especially righteous.

Think of how the Pharisees interpreted the law about not working on the Sabbath. In their enthusiasm for purity, they declared tight regulations about what was considered work, so that they would be sure to do nothing on the Sabbath that could be seen as work. In one case, they criticized the disciples for eating grain as they went through a field of wheat. Rather than compassionately seeing the need to eat, they condemned rubbing heads of grain between one's hands because that was thrashing wheat, working on the Sabbath. On another occasion, rather than seeing healing a sick person as a good deed, they criticized Jesus, saying that he was working on the Sabbath. In their drive for purity, the Pharisees increased the burden of the law by the way they interpreted it. When we set strict limits to define faithful behavior, when we draw crystal clear lines around what is right and declare everything beyond that bright line to be wrong and sinful, we run a high risk of being consumed by purity and devoid of compassion. The whole process degenerates into moral bean counting.

Then Jesus goes on to speak about people who behave righteously, but for the wrong reason. They make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long, he says. What is this about? In Deuteronomy chapter six, the Hebrews were told, "Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. <sup>8</sup> Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead." (Deuteronomy 6:6&8 NRS) In obedience to this passage and three others, parchment scrolls of these four passages are placed inside leather containers and then they are bound to the arm and forehead, especially during morning prayer. Jesus said that the Pharisees were making their phylacteries extra large as a way of visually declaring, "My faith is bigger than your faith."

There is also the issue of the fringe. In the book of Numbers we read, <sup>38</sup> Speak to the Israelites, and tell them to make fringes on the corners of their garments throughout their generations and to put a blue cord on the fringe at each corner. <sup>39</sup> You have the fringe so that, when you see it, you will remember all the commandments of the LORD and do them, and not follow the lust of your own heart and your own eyes. (Numbers 15:38-39 NRS) The Pharisees had lost sight of the fringe as a reminder of God's commandments. By having longer tassels than other people, they were trying to declare that they were more pious, more righteous than others.

With the visual show of large phylacteries and long tassels, the Pharisees invited, enjoyed, and expected to be seated at the head table at banquets, get the best seats in the synagogue, and to be hailed in

public with wonderful titles. Father was a title given to the ancient patriarchs, especially Abraham, and calling someone "Father" was therefore a great honor. Rabbi literally means, "my great one" or "my lord." It was an honorary title for outstanding teachers. The Pharisees loved to be praised and honored in public. Like Naaman, they felt that they deserved special recognition and personal treatment. Today, we might say that they had a "reserved parking" mentality.

Jesus was pointing out that the Pharisees spoke and dressed in ways that would seem to be about glorifying God, but it was corrupted by self-aggrandizement and drawing attention to themselves. Jesus concluded by saying that those who exalt themselves will be humbled and all who humble themselves will be exalted.

Pious words and orthodox convictions alone do not make a person faithful. The true measure of faithfulness is found not in the words one speaks or the doctrines one accepts but in the orientation of one's heart.<sup>2</sup> How often do we concentrate on words and beliefs and neglect how our heart is doing? How often do we set ourselves above others in one way or another? The letter to the Colossians says that when we are in Christ - and Christ is in us - our ethnic distinctions go away, economic differences lose their meaning. The writer goes on to say that we are to be clothed with compassion, kindness, humility, patience, and forgiveness - and we're to tie all of that together with love, the glue that will hold all of these attributes of the heart together.

A key element is humility. If we think we're better than someone else, our care for them will be patronizing. But if we have humility, our care can be an expression of love. The care may be the same either way, but it makes a huge difference whether our motivation is a feeling of superiority or love.

Humility isn't a popular virtue. Pride would have us be self-sufficient. Independence from others is our goal. We automatically shift into filling our own needs and wants first, and deferring others until later, which can easily stretch into never. Pride measures position, and keeps score. Someone once remarked that once our needs for food, shelter, and clothing are met, the rest is about keeping score. True humility doesn't do ratings, but celebrates the gifts and accomplishments of all.

Jim Melchiorre is a teacher who lives in New York City. One frequently encounters people on the street who ask for money for food. He carries some food in his backpack to give to those who ask. One day he was in a hurry to get to his son's basketball game and he walked right past a man asking for money for food. About fifteen feet past the man, he heard the beggar shout at him, "You could at least look at me!" Jim realized that he had exalted himself, his actions declaring that his schedule was more important than the man's needs. I suspect we all do that type of thing fairly often. We're too busy with our lives to notice the homeless, too busy to call a friend, too focused on our entertainment or relaxation to visit a shut-in. The dinner we shop for gets more thought than the red wagon in the hallway. The new table cloth or the Christmas lights for the roof line are on our mind more clearly than the plight of the homeless.

I'm sorry to say that Jim's experience on that sidewalk in New York convicts me of overlooking the needs of others. Pride is the opposite of humility. Pride is the attitude that my concerns, simply because they're mine, take precedence over the concerns of other people.

Jim Melchiorre tried an experiment that really changed him. I think it's one that would do us all good. Drop the words *pride* and *proud* from your vocabulary. Instead of saying, "I'm proud of my children" say "I'm blessed by my children." Instead of saying, "I'm proud of the work that my department did" say "I was honored to work with those people." It shifts us from describing ourselves as possessing something (pride) - to receiving something (blessing and honor). After a while, your attitude changes to humbly seeing life as a gift.<sup>3</sup> Humility, that unattractive and seldom sought virtue, is the important quality that paves the way for us to love our neighbor as we love ourselves. Amen.

Sisters and Brothers,  
 Seek humility.  
 Stop using the words pride and proud.  
 Instead, speak of being blessed and honored.

<sup>NRS</sup> **Romans 12:3** For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. (Rom 12:3 NRS)

**Exodus 13:8-9 NRS** <sup>8</sup> You shall tell your child on that day, 'It is because of what the LORD did for me when I came out of Egypt.' <sup>9</sup> It shall serve for you as a sign on your hand and as a reminder on your forehead, so that the teaching of the LORD may be on your lips; for with a strong hand the LORD brought you out of Egypt.

**Exodus 13:16 NRS** It shall serve as a sign on your hand and as an emblem on your forehead that by strength of hand the LORD brought us out of Egypt.

**Philippians 2:5-8 NRS** <sup>5</sup> Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, <sup>6</sup> who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, <sup>7</sup> but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, <sup>8</sup> he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death-- even death on a cross.

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<sup>1</sup> Earl F. Palmer. *Feasting on the Word, A, 4* (Louisville, WJK, 2011) p 260

<sup>2</sup> Tim Beash-Verhey, *Feasting on the Word, A, 4* (Louisville, WJK, 2011) p 262

<sup>3</sup> Jim Melchiorre, *The Upper Room Disciplines 2011* (Nashville, Upper Room Books, 2010) p 313-314