

Pastor Gregory P. Fryer
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
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James 3:13 -- 4:3-8, Mark 9:30-37
Christian Humility

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

³⁵And he sat down and called the twelve; and he said to them, “If any one would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all.” (Mark 9:35, RSV)

Here Jesus bids his followers toward humility. He is seeking not only humility of conduct, but also humility of heart. He seeks not just kindness toward others, but also love of them, counting ourselves to be “last of all.” He asks not only that we should *appear* humble, but should actually *be* so. We are to be a humble folk. “If any one would be first, he must *be* last of all and servant of all.”

That is not the ordinary way of getting ahead in this world, neither in the ancient world nor in our modern world. In the ancient Greek and Roman civilization in which early Christianity made its way, humility in conduct, by which the great man would stoop down and do some kindness to the poor man, such condescension was praised, but actual self-abasement would be considered strange and unmanly. The king might ride through the town and toss coins to the poor from his chariot, but it would be thought somehow ignoble for the king to get off his chariot and help the blacksmith with his day’s work. Think of the heroes of the Trojan Wars: could anyone imagine either Achilles or Hector actually going out into the fields and lend his strong back to the farm work? No, that would be thought ignoble. Would Hercules do what John Cardinal O’Conner used to do here in New York: tend the AIDS victims and empty the bed pans? Hercules would do no such thing. It would not be in keeping with his nobility. In the ancient world, it was possible to *display* humility, but to actually become humble... to count the throne as of no real consequence, to get down to the level of the poor, truly counting the poor as equal to yourself... well such humility would not be considered virtue, but confusion.

In our modern world, we know how to get ahead in life. We study hard, we craft ourselves as if we were statues, forging within ourselves disciplines and skills. We develop our contacts, we press our advantages, we save, we invest, we take on big projects. Bit by bit, we progress and cut more of a figure in this world. Yet Jesus reverses things and teaches us that if anyone would be first, he must *be* last -- not simply conduct himself or herself as if he were momentarily last, but somehow *be* last, be there among them. It is nice when one is charitable. It is better still when the heart counts itself no higher than the one receiving the charity.

Jesus is teaching a new scale of things. In the lovely phrase of John Henry Newman, it is the nature of God's Kingdom that we "rise by falling."¹ By that scale, the true heroes among us are not necessarily the famous and the powerful, but the servants. I cannot help but think, for example, of that little band of French nuns in Harlem who go out into the byways and under the bridges in order to hold and comfort and nourish the victims of AIDS and other diseases. The nuns themselves are pious and virtuous, but they reach out and tend the broken and suffering, without distinguishing or condemning anyone. They distribute food and clothing and furniture. They are a kind of public illustration for us of God's kingdom and of the teaching of our Lord: they are first precisely in that they are servants and count themselves among the least of all.

Let us imagine humility of heart in three cases. I speak of humility toward (1) those that have opposed or scorned us, (2) the poor, and (3) Jesus.

OUR OPPONENTS

What did Jesus command concerning our opponents?

⁴³Ye have heard that it hath been said, Thou shalt love thy neighbour, and hate thine enemy. ⁴⁴But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you; (Matthew 5:43-44, KJV)

Now this is counter-intuitive, isn't it? To follow Jesus here requires a retraining of our hearts, for it goes against the natural flow of things. For the natural flow of things is to seek to elevate ourselves and to bring down the enemy. Is not that what we hope for and dream of and perhaps even plan for? The one who has scorned us and humiliated us or struck us a blow -- do we not long to reverse the roles? Do we not envision some humiliation of our opponent, some crushing reply we could make, some devastating blow we could level -- a legal blow, naturally, but a devastating blow nonetheless?

But Jesus opposes all such conquering of the enemy except conquering him through love. Jesus asks that we suffer wrong rather than do it:

But I say unto you, That ye resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also. (Matthew 5:39, KJV)

Jesus teaches that we owe our enemy a blessing. ⁴⁴But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you..." Jesus asks for a conversion of our hearts toward our enemies, such that we will humble ourselves before them and count ourselves no better than they are.

Incredible thought! Most times we would be glad to be done with our opponent. We would be glad if he moved away. We do not long for reconciliation

¹ John Henry Newman, Sermon 22, "Weapons of the Spirit."

and for the chance that our antagonism should turn into friendship. We count ourselves superior to our enemy -- perhaps not superior in wealth or strength or beauty, but at least superior in morality or intellect. And if we do not credit ourselves within being smarter *in general* than our enemy, nonetheless we count ourselves smarter on this particular issue.

But Jesus urges us to abandon such pride. He urges us to dive down toward our opponent and to reckon ourselves no better than that one. Or put more positively, to reckon that that one is full of potential and goodness, same as us. Altogether, the call of Jesus to “be last of all and servant of all” does not exclude our opponent, but protects our opponent.

THE POOR

Next, let us consider the poor. Some people are poor because they are born that way and have never been able to escape their poverty. World Bank estimates released in August 2008 show that about one in four people in the developing world were living on less than \$1.25 a day in 2005.² Even if we suppose that \$1.25 goes farther in the developing world than here, still it is a wonderful thing to think that I could reach into my pocket and fetch some money, send \$1.25 to someone, and help keep that person alive for the day. And we know that keeping someone alive means more than food. It also means shelter and medical care.

Lots of women in this world spend a significant portion of their day and strength simply walking to collect water and firewood. They are not home tending their children, they are not learning a craft, starting a business, they are just trying to gather some water and bring it home. What a blessing it would be simply to have a good water well in the village. That’s why I am glad that many of you in this congregation have walked in the CROP Walk here in the city, because Church World Services uses the money raised both on domestic poverty and on world poverty, and the world poverty includes both food and the digging of wells and the employment of local workers in development.

It dawned on me when I was just a boy, and I have never gotten over it, that many of the poor people of this world are just as smart, just as good as I am trying to be, with hopes and dreams and yearnings just as intense, just as important as my own. In fact, I bet they are smarter and better than me. But they hardly have a chance. Jesus bids us to humility and service toward them. We might be superior to them educationally and materially, but let us not suppose we are superior to them spiritually.

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<http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/TOPICS/EXTPOVERTY/0,,contentMDK:20153855~menuPK:373757~pagePK:148956~piPK:216618~theSitePK:336992,00.html>

Some people are new to poverty. At one time they were doing okay in life, but now, they are not doing well. Never before were they unemployed. Never before were they without health insurance. Never before did they have trouble feeding their families. They are the “new poor,” and there are many, many of them in our town.

I have been pondering and grieving over some statistics. The Salvation Army reports some troubling figures:

- ❖ New York State unemployment rate reached 16-year high in June 2009
- ❖ Over the past year, New York families who lost housing and entered homeless shelters grew by 40%
- ❖ New Yorkers with difficulty affording food jumped by 1 million to 4 million – a 25% increase

You might remember from our most recent newsletter that next Sunday we are scheduled to hear a ten-minute Temple Talk by a representative of *Lutheran Bible Translators*. Down the road, we have another such presentation on the schedule. I have invited a representative of the Salvation Army to talk to us in mid-November about ministry to the poor of our city. I think that many of us have affection for the Salvation Army because they were so fast on the ground on September 11, 2001 and because they have such a good reputation for compassion in their ministry to others. They do not discriminate, they do not condemn. They feed the hungry, shelter the homeless, offer affordable day care and youth programs, distribute toys to children. They do these things in the spirit of that saying that has sprung into the hearts of many of you: There, but for the grace of God, go I.

Again, some people are poor not because they were born into poverty, nor because they have suffered some blow that has reduced them to poverty, but because voluntary poverty is part of their station in life. Those French nuns in Harlem are poor, for example, not by birth but because of their mission. And there are soldiers and police and firefighters and social service workers who will never be rich by Wall Street standards, yet they are not to be condemned.

Now we come to the interesting case of poverty, for our Lord’s saying about those who would be first, must be last of all. We have noted that some people are poor by birth, some by blows, some by choice. Now, let us consider those who are poor because of idleness or the squandering of opportunities.

First off, I think it should be said that if we are such, if we are poor because we are idle and just not trying, then we should repent and try to do better. For if we would do better, we could then give alms to others and not take up the alms meant for the widow, the orphan, and the elderly.

But what of the other case: the case where the idle beggar is asking you for money? Of course, you do not know him or her to be idle. But suppose he is. What does Christian humility mean toward such a one?

I knew a man in our congregation who never walked by a beggar without stopping to look him in the eye with respect and to give him an answer. Maybe he said No, maybe Yes. I do not know. But that he should stop and acknowledge the existence of the beggar and bear goodwill toward the beggar -- well, I find that to be a Christlike thing.

Let me precise about that. To have goodwill toward the beggar is to be like Christ. It is to be like Jesus. For we are all beggars compared to him. Interestingly, those are final words from the mighty pen of Martin Luther before he died: We are all beggars! We have been far too idle, far too immersed in sin. We have squandered our inheritance; we have lived lives unworthy of our Saviour. Our only hope is that he will befriend us, though we are undeserving of his friendship. Yet he it is who surrendered the glories of heaven and descended all the way to our level, so that he could look at us eye-to-eye and love of enough to die for us. And so it is that the apostle Paul sings:

⁹For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich. (2 Corinthians 8:9, RSV)

HUMILITY BEFORE JESUS

And this leads me to my final case: humility before Jesus. I want to press the question upon us: Do we count ourselves to be above Jesus? Do we think that his manner of life is okay *for him*, but not *for us*?

From our Lord's humble birth in a stable in Bethlehem to the sacrificial nature of the Mass just ahead of us -- that Blessed Sacrament which brings you and me to the foot of the Cross at Golgotha -- our faith invites us into the pattern of Christ's humility and service.³

In that Gospel story we celebrate on Maundy Thursday, when Jesus washes the feet of his disciples, he quite plainly invites his followers into his pattern of life:

¹³Ye call me Master and Lord: and ye say well; for so I am. ¹⁴If I then, your Lord and Master, have washed your feet; ye also ought to wash one another's feet. ¹⁵For I have given you an example, that ye should do as I have done to you. ¹⁶Verily, verily, I say unto you, The servant is not greater than his lord; neither he that is sent greater than he that sent him. ¹⁷If ye know these things, happy are ye if ye do them. (John 13:13-17, KJV)

³ The International Lutheran-Roman Catholic dialogue draws this conclusion: "The Lord present among us wants to draw us into the movement of his life." Also, "Thus is rehearsed in the Lord's Supper what is practiced in the whole Christian life."(International Lutheran-Roman Catholic Dialogue, *The Eucharist*, pages 17-18 and 46-47, referred to in Jenson, *Unbaptized God*, page 37.)

And recall the teaching of Jesus concerning the wedding feast:

“When you are invited by any one to a marriage feast, do not sit down in a place of honor, lest a more eminent man than you be invited by him; ⁹and he who invited you both will come and say to you, ‘Give place to this man,’ and then you will begin with shame to take the lowest place. ¹⁰But when you are invited, go and sit in the lowest place, so that when your host comes he may say to you, ‘Friend, go up higher’; then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at table with you. ¹¹For every one who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.” (Luke 14:8-11, RSV)

To be humble toward others, whether they are wretched through no fault of their own, or because they have squandered opportunities and made themselves poor, is a Christ-like thing. To be humble toward those who have opposed us or scorned us, and to suffer little humiliations at their hands if thereby we might attain some unity with them, well, such humility follows the pattern of Christ’s love toward us. It brings us low, but in falling, we rise, through the grace and merits of Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.