

HUMBLING AND EXALTING

A SERMON FOR ORDINARY TIME  
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FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH  
MARIANNA, FLORIDA  
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MATTHEW 23:1-12

*“He who is greatest among you shall be your servant; whoever exalts himself will be humbled and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.” Matthew 23:11-12*

One of the most vivid images of the Christ comes to us from John’s account of the Passover meal on the night in which Jesus was betrayed. You recall John doesn’t tell the story of the Last Supper, with the breaking of the bread and the pouring of the cup. I think the reason he doesn’t is because he assumed his readers knew that part of the story. Instead, John tells us what Matthew, Mark, and Luke didn’t: that before the meal, when they were seated at the table, Jesus washed the feet of his disciples. He wrapped a towel around his waist, took a basin of water, and washed their feet. He who was greatest among them became their servant, doing what a servant or a slave would do in the homes of the wealthy.

George Buttrick calls this “Christian Lowliness”, and says that it is “(an) oft-repeated plea—seen in (Matthew 18:4 and 20:26. Luke (14:11 and 18:14) has it in almost these very words. (*The Interpreter’s Bible Commentary, Volume 7, page 532*)

It is a wonderful concept, Christian Lowliness. Remember what Jesus said in Matthew 11:29: “Take my yoke upon me and learn from me; for I am meek and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.”

The word translated lowly could also be translated humble, and I suppose we could call Christian Lowliness Christian humility.

There are times when we need a little humility, or a little lowliness. I think both Burt Reynolds and Joe Namath did television commercials forty years or so ago, featuring the Mac Davis song that went something like, “O Lord, it’s hard to be humble when you’re perfect in every way. I can’t wait to look in the mirror, ‘because I get better looking each day...”

Well, most of us don't wake up in the morning feeling like that. We don't have that much self esteem. But some folks, well, they are just arrogant. One of the things that people in the Third World, who are not Christians, say about us American Christians is that we are arrogant, theologically. We have an air of moral superiority, of perfection, of having gotten it right, that causes them to not want to be like us. And since "like us" might mean being a Christian, we turn off the very people we are trying to attract.

I wonder if that is only true in the Third World. It may be true everywhere. We Christians can be right condescending and we Presbyterians do have a lot to be proud of.

The scribes and the Pharisees whom Jesus is pronouncing woe upon here in the 23<sup>rd</sup> Chapter of Matthew's gospel were proud of who they were. They put on their finery, and they made their phylacteries which they bound on their arms wide and the tassels on the corners of their garments long, and they looked good. But they were exalting themselves, not their God. And Jesus told them that all who exalted themselves would be humbled, and all who would humble themselves would be exalted.

Saint Francis of Assisi is an example of that.

Francis was born into a rich merchant family. But following a serious illness in his twenties, he made a pilgrimage to Rome. Moved by the beggars in front of St. Peter's Basilica, he changed clothes with one of them, and spent a day begging. Returning home, he devoted himself to ministry to lepers and to restoring a ruined church, but one day, in his reading of scripture, he encountered Matthew 10:7-19. He took those words of Jesus as his personal call, which tell His disciples to take no gold or silver nor baggage, or even sandals or staff, but to go forth in faith to proclaim the good news, to cure the sick, and do God's work.

Francis discarded staff and shoes, wealth and home, put on a long dark robe belted with a rope, and set out to minister to the world.

The Franciscan order that he founded and his good works persist to this day.

Many remember Saint Francis as the patron saint of animals. Statues of him grace lawns, gardens, parks, around the world. Churches and hospitals, including the one where I did my chaplaincy training, bear his name. Francis of Assisi humbled himself. The church and history have exalted him

I won't try to give you an example of someone who exalted himself who has been humbled. There are far too many figures in sports, in entertainment, in business, in politics, who serve as examples of what it means to exalt self, whom time and history have humbled.

Well, yes, I'll give you one, since they made a movie about his life: Senator Joe McCarthy. Remember him? Feared by a nation, persecutor of any who might be a Communist, he forced celebrities to testify in Congressional hearings, and then vilified and embarrassed them. He was, for a time, the most powerful man in America. Censured by the Senate, he died disgraced and will live forever in memory as an example of politics and intrigue run amok.

Exalted, he was humbled.

For any public figure, like an athlete, an entertainer, a politician, a preacher, praise can be intoxicating. The great ones are the ones who maintain humility. Billy Graham comes to mind as a preacher, who has never lost his humility. Lawton Chiles, Florida's late governor, may stand as the politician. I'm not sure I've got an entertainer or an athlete to name. I'll let you do that.

No, wait! I've got one: Ryan Leaf: remember him? Sixteen years ago, the great controversy at the NFL draft was over which quarterback should be taken with the first pick of the draft: Peyton Manning or Ryan Leaf. Neither one won the Heisman Trophy, but Leaf was the first team all American, had the stronger arm, was bigger, and was regarded as having greater potential.

In four seasons, Ryan Leaf was gone from professional football. He has spent most of the last decade in prison, where he remains today in his native Montana, convicted of drug-related crimes in two states.

Exalted, once the best, he is now humbled, amongst the dregs of society.

For us who would follow Christ, humility, Christian lowliness, may not mean a life-time of poverty as it did for Saint Francis. It may mean one single act of self-denial. It may mean one conscious act of loving service. It may mean putting pride aside, and doing something for Jesus that you would never do for anyone else.

Christian lowliness is easy to define: humility after the example of Jesus. It is hard to live.

I want to say, in closing, that today I begin my third year as your interim pastor. I have been exalted and humbled to serve you and I thank God for each of you, and for each day of the two years I have been with you.

May God continue to exalt our church as we serve Jesus Christ together, and may we be humble in our service after His example.

Amen.