

True Humility

Philippians 2:5-11 | Gloria Dei Lutheran Church, April 2, 2023

Have you ever noticed how the humble people of the world rarely get noticed?

Whenever I read a history textbook I find that it is always filled with the actions and lives of great, powerful people. Men and women who were self-confident, assertive, and more than willing to use power or arrogance to get what they wanted.

The loud and important people of history get remembered. We don't usually hear about the humble people. Those who put others first typically slip into the background, usually unnoticed.

I guess that's the definition of humility, but it would be nice to know more about these humble, quiet people. These self-sacrificing people who can be models to us of the kind of humility we are called to as Christians.

It's not easy to be humble. It's in our sinful nature to *want* attention, praise, credit, respect, and admiration. Many Christian churches in the world today have fallen for this trap. They preach sermons about how we can achieve the best, and be successful, and make the most money. But to be a Christian is to be humble. And Christ gave us the perfect example and the perfect source of humility.

Today is Palm Sunday, or Passion Sunday. With the Resurrection just a week away, today we remember when Jesus entered Jerusalem to begin his week of suffering. Jesus was the perfect example of humility.

Let's pray. Father God, thank you for Jesus. Thank you for his life and his example, but especially thank you for his death and resurrection. Thank you for making a way for us to be saved through Christ's humble acts of obedience. Teach us today through your word, in your name we pray: Amen.

Some believe that this passage in Philippians 2 was a hymn, maybe the first

Christian hymn ever written. There are three parts to this hymn that I want to highlight this morning. This hymn can help us think about Palm Sunday and remember all of Jesus' life.

First, Jesus "emptied himself." This is talking about the birth of Jesus, that first Christmas night in a manger outside Bethlehem. That birth was really an amazing display of humility, wasn't it?

He could have been born in any other way! Part of a royal family, in a palace, with guards and servants and everything he could have ever needed. He was the God of the universe; the creator and sustainer of everything! But when Jesus was born, he emptied himself. "He took the form of a servant and was born in the likeness of men."

He was born in a dark cave surrounded by dirty animals and smelly shepherds. He spent his adult life wandering through Israel, with no money or even possessions. He ate with criminals, he slept with outlaws, and he was arrested with common thieves. Jesus left his perfect position in heaven to come join our sinful, helpless race and offer His perfect and flawless life in exchange for ours.

One of the great mysteries of our faith is how our infinite God was able to become a man. Christ was fully and completely a human person, just like you and me and every one of the billions of other people on this planet. He had a physical body, he could run and walk and jump. He had physical needs and required physical things: water when he was thirsty, food when he was hungry, sleep when he was tired. Jesus was a man.

But he also never stopped being God. He never for a moment stopped being the perfect God of the entire universe, the one who created every star in the sky and knows the name of every fish in the sea. The infinite and eternal God of creation... became a man. We call this the "Humiliation of Christ." Not "humiliation" like embarrassment or shame, but the real meaning of "humiliation": being humbled. Humility.

Because he loved us, Christ emptied himself. He was still God, but he chose to hide his divinity for a time. Like wrapping a cloak around himself, voluntarily giving up his divine status and power so that he could be a perfect human. So that he could love us and serve us.

That is true humility. He was also obedient.

Verse 8: "And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross."

The humility of the Second Person of the Trinity began when he was born in Bethlehem, but it did not end there. The humiliation of Christ continued and even deepened to a point no one else had ever or will ever experience when the God of the Universe was nailed to a cross.

Humility and obedience even unto death. But did you notice how this hymn in Philippians specifically highlighted the *kind* of death that Jesus died? Execution on a cross was a brutal and agonizing kind of death, especially at that time in history, but it was also a kind of death that was specifically cursed by God.

When one of the Israelites committed a crime worthy of death they would hang the body on a post or a tree to show everyone that sin was a very big deal, and this person's sin had cut them off from the community and had cut them off from a relationship with God. Deuteronomy 21:23 says: "A hanged man is cursed by God."

Death on a cross was the worst kind of death. Not just because of the physical pain but because it was the very lowest and most shameful death imaginable. This was the lowest point of Christ's humility.

But it was all a part of the plan. Jesus was being obedient to his Father. The great rescue plan that God had planned and put into motion since Adam and Eve first sinned in the Garden of Eden all of those years ago. This was the plan, the only plan, that would rescue God's precious but broken children from their sin.

Jesus was obedient. His life and death was the most noble and selfless act of humility and love the world had ever seen.

But notice what the next verses say:

Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

God turned the depths of Christ's humiliation into the absolute heights of exaltation. By rising from the dead Christ took off that cloak that was hiding and limiting his divine powers. He is still a fully and complete human person, but his body is perfect and flawless, like Adam and Eve's bodies when they were first created. Today, after defeating death, Christ is exalted higher than anybody and anything, and one day soon everybody and everything will bow before him in reverence and praise his name.

From humiliation to exaltation. Christ is the perfect example of a humble life, but he is also the perfect source of humility.

God calls us to believe in him and trust that Christ's death and resurrection satisfied the requirement that we were required to pay. And he calls us to imitate Christ's humility. What does a humble life look like? A few verses earlier in Philippians 2 give us the answer.

First, we ought to do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit. **Second**, we are to regard others are more important than ourselves. And **third**, we are to look out for the interests of others.

That's a tall order, isn't it? These three things don't come naturally for us. It's human nature to want the best things for ourselves, or to jockey for the better position, or to think of ourselves and our own interests before we think about someone else and what they might need.

But God calls us to be humble. Throughout the Bible, God rarely uses a proud, arrogant person to accomplish His plans. He uses the meek and lowly, the weak and unusual.

He uses people like that to show His glory and power. He uses weak and seemingly-insignificant people to display His might and grandeur. To show the world that the person He used didn't bring anything to the table; God did all the work.

He uses people like Mary, a teenager from a little village, to usher in the greatest event in history: the incarnation. He used a barn for the birth of the King of Kings, and the first people He told were shepherds.

When Mary was pregnant with Jesus, she was extremely grateful that she was chosen for such an incredible task. She was honored and privileged, but she *remained humble* and exalted the Lord. Here are a few lines from her song of thanksgiving, called the Magnificat:

"My soul exalts the Lord, and my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior. For He has had regard for the humble state of His bondservant. He has brought down rulers from their thrones, and has exalted those who were humble. He has filled the hungry with good things; and sent away the rich empty-handed."

Aren't those great words? "He has filled the hungry with good things."

God uses insignificant people like Moses. Moses was a shepherd, a murderer, and had a speech impediment. And God told him that he would be God's voice to Pharaoh.

Or think about how God chose the next king of Israel. The prophet Nathan went to Jesse's house to find the next king from among the sons of Jesse. So Jesse lined up all of his sons in order, and Nathan went down the line. But Nathan noticed that Jesse forgot about his youngest son, David.

David was young, David wasn't strong, and David was more concerned about playing his harp than he was about management or administration or other things kings are supposed to be good at. But God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong, and David would be "a man after God's own heart."

God doesn't accomplish many things with proud or arrogant people. He uses the weak and seemingly-insignificant people to display His glory. We don't bring *anything* to the table; God brings *everything*.

It's God alone who atones for our sins, who issues a replacement for the punishment we deserve, who grants us the faith that we need to believe in Him and then grow that faith in our hearts and minds. It's God who fills us with His Spirit and molds us and makes us into His image and likeness.

We are empty and lowly; God fills us and makes us whole.

God calls us to be humble. He calls us to come before him with humility and reverence. And when we do that, He'll fill us and give us everything we need.

Matthew 23:12: *"Those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."*

Proverbs 29:23: *"Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you."*

The history books might not write about the most humble people in the world, but God calls us to live humbly and come to him with empty hands.

Christ gave us the perfect example of humility and he gives us the perfect source of humility. God grant that we live in his example and strength.

Amen.