

Humility

Mark 9:30-37

September 23, 2012

So, last Tuesday morning, during our weekly staff meeting in my office, we had an argument. Yeah, Greg and Miah and Marcos and Teri and Wayne and I were arguing with each other about which one of us is the greatest. Miah won!

Now, you know that didn't happen. We just don't do things like that. You don't do things like that. You don't argue with your co-workers at UNI or John Deere, or argue with your neighbors on Baltimore Street or in Friendship Village, about who is better than whom? Do you?

Then what were those disciples thinking? There they were, walking down the road with Jesus toward the village of Capernaum, but they kept slowing down, hanging back, whispering among themselves at first, but then growing louder and more animated in their conversation, arguing among themselves about who is the greatest! I mean, really! Didn't Jesus just tell them: "If you want to follow me, you must deny yourself and be ready to carry your own cross?" And they're arguing among themselves about who is the greatest?

Didn't they hear what he said? Don't they get it?

Do we get it?

Sure, we know better than to go around arguing with each other about who is the greatest, but do we really get it? Jesus' disciples themselves knew better. When Jesus asked them, "What were you arguing about on the road?," they didn't want to answer, because they did know better and they were embarrassed. They knew like we know that you just don't go around talking yourself up, bragging on yourself, unless you want to seem like an egotistical narcissist. It is better to be humble.

Humility. It is another of the nine virtues listed by Paul in his letter to the Galatians as fruits of the Spirit's work in those who follow Jesus: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, humility, and self-control. It is one of the nine virtues, but one of rarest of them, because we don't get it.

We think humility is about keeping your nose out of the air, about keeping it quiet and understated when you are talking about yourself, but consider Jesus' response to his disciples' behavior. What did he tell them? Did he tell them to knock it off? Did he scold them for arguing among themselves like that?

No, he didn't. He said to them, in effect: "So you really want to be great? Well, here's how!"

Whoever wants to be first must place himself last ... of all, and be the servant ... of all.

This is humility.

Is it humility to keep quiet, to avoid drawing attention to yourself when you're with a group of friends or neighbors? No, that's just being shy!

Is it humility to keep quiet and say nothing when somebody is doing it wrong, when you know there is a better way? No, that's just being cowardly!

Is it humility when, after someone has been praising you, you say, "Oh, it was nothing?" No, that's just being disingenuous! What you really mean is: "Oh, please, say more! Say more!"

No, humility is not about keeping quiet. It's not about steering attention away from yourself. It's not about what we say or don't say at all, but about what we do. Humility is about being a servant. Humility is about putting yourself last.

And that's why humility is among the rarest of virtues, because who wants to be last? Maybe we're not arguing about who is the greatest, but we're hoping we're at least somewhere in the middle! We know we may not be the best or the first, but we want at least to be ahead of somebody, we want at least to be better than somebody ... right?

Listen! Even children -- I won't name names! -- even children aren't happy just being told they did something well. They want to be told they did it better, better than their brother or better than you, Papa!

We are constantly measuring ourselves -- dare I say? -- against the competition, comparing our intelligence, our skills, our achievements, sometimes favorably, sometimes unfavorably. On the one hand, we take satisfaction from being able to do something well, from being able to do it surpassingly well, better than most everybody else, or at least better than somebody else. Or, on the other hand, we feel diminished and devalued by what everybody else or at least somebody else is able to do that we aren't doing or can't do.

Isn't that true? Or is it just me?

When someone else comes up with a great new idea, do you think to yourself: "Why don't I come up with great new ideas?"

Or when someone else says the right thing at the right time, do you think to yourself: "Why don't I know what to say when I need to?"

Or when you see somebody else do something extra-ordinary, do you both appreciate the accomplishment, but also depreciate yourself, feeling less important, less valuable, because you didn't do it or even think of doing it?

Or is it just me?

We are constantly measuring ourselves, judging ourselves. We need affirmation. We need recognition. We need to matter. We need something to point to to prove that we matter. We need somebody else to tell us we matter. But what can you point to to prove that you matter, that really matters? Whom do you have to tell you you matter, who really matters?

Can you see where I'm going with this? The measuring/comparing/judging game is fruitless and endless and ultimately pointless. We can't prove that we matter in a way that will finally satisfy us, because for every affirmation there is another disappointment, for every gain there is a loss, for every success there is a failure. For every time we feel good about something we have done, in the very next moment we will feel badly about something we have not done or can't do.

You may be able to measure the value of some accomplishments, but you can't measure the value of people. We are what we are and our value as persons cannot be measured, it can only be bestowed.

And there is only One who can bestow it. I matter because I matter to God, period. And if I matter to God, what else do I need? When I know I matter to God, there is no reason to worry anymore about how other people judge me or even about how I judge myself. I am free to be generous, gracious, humble.

This is humility and this is why humility is a gift of God's Spirit at work in me, because it is rooted in the knowledge of God's love for me. Humility arises not out of weakness, but out of strength, out of the strength God gives me. Knowing that I am loved by God leaves me secure and unthreatened and confident, secure enough and unthreatened enough and confident enough to be just fine being last.

This is humility: putting yourself last, being the servant ... of all.

That's what Jesus told his disciples and then he showed them what it means. He stood a child in front of them and put his arms around the child and said to them: "Whoever welcomes in my name one of these children welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me, welcomes not only me but also the one who sent me."

Jesus didn't tell them -- this time -- to be like children. He told them to welcome children in his name. Humility is not about being child-like. Humility is about welcoming children. Humility is not about what I am, but about what I do. Humility is not about trying to be humble, but about welcoming ... you.

Humility is about welcoming you, because you are a child ... of God! You are not my competition and you are not my judge. You are a child ... of God. You are who you are and I am who I am, and what we both are is children of God! Nothing you are and nothing you do can diminish who I am and nothing I am and nothing I do can diminish who you are.

I can appreciate you, I can applaud you, I can value you, I can love you, I can serve you, I can put you ahead of me, I can put all of you ahead of me, I can be last and it makes me nothing less, because my value comes not from measuring myself against you, not from you telling me I matter, but from God.

I can give everything away and lose nothing! I can put myself last and even be considered by all the world to be last and still be first in God's eyes!

This is humility: putting myself last, being the servant of all, welcoming you.

You are welcome here ...

You are welcome here where God knows your name and your name matters ...

You are welcome here where your name matters, but your name is no more important than any other name ...

You are welcome here where no title means anything, except this one -- child of God ...

You are welcome here ...