

love is not proud

Matthew 5:1-10

January 15, 2017

The older I get, the less I know. Or maybe a better way of saying it is that the older I get, the more I realize I don't know and the less sure I am about what I do know. But that's not the whole story either, because there are things I am absolutely sure of. I am absolutely sure that everything that is, you and I and this astonishingly wondrous and beautiful universe in which we live comes from God. I am absolutely sure that love comes from God and that Jesus is the proof. But about all the rest, I am not so sure.

And that's OK. In fact, I believe this is wisdom: to know that there is so much I don't know and to be humble and modest about what I do know. I'm not sure I'm getting any smarter at this point in my life, but I am becoming wiser.

Wisdom comes with age. It takes time to become wise. A child may be smart, but not yet wise. A child may experience happiness, but not yet joy, or not be ready yet to tell the difference. A child may be affectionate and loyal, but not yet be capable of undertaking the sacrifice and submission and patience and endurance that true love requires. A child may act unselfishly, but not yet be humble.

We do grow up. Not all of us at the same rate and, sadly, some of us not at all. The world is filled with infantile adults. But we do grow up or, at least, we are given the opportunity to grow up, through experience and suffering, success and failure, pain and wonder.

And we are still growing up. This is something to look forward to! Our lives are not a bell curve. We don't spend the first half of our lives growing in strength and wisdom and power and the last half giving it all up. It's not that we climb uphill until we reach our peak (somewhere around age 45?) and then it's all downhill from there.

No! Our bodies may start wearing out, but we keep on growing up. We keep on getting better. Some of the best people I have known have been old: Harold and Jean and Mitzi and Helen.

Do you remember Helen Hutchinson? Her memorial service was celebrated in this sanctuary seventeen years ago today. I loved Helen. She died at age ninety-three, and at age ninety-three she was a stunning woman, a remarkable human being, full of vigor and curiosity, playfulness and joy. Here is some of what I said about her then:

Helen was old when she died; she was old when I first met her ... And she was happy! Her happiness was evident to me in the intensity and energy with which she approached everything. Her body movements were bold and decisive. Her speech was animated and vigorous, and her conversation was filled with good humor and a generous dose of laughter.

Helen did not live in the past, clinging only to memories or former experiences. She lived in and for the present with boldness, undimmed curiosity, and ambition. The shelves of her apartment were filled with books -- good books. She loved to read and once her blindness no longer permitted it, she still enjoyed "reading" by listening to talking books on tape.

When I would visit, we would talk sometimes about the books she was "reading." Some of them were good, and some were duds in her opinion. Other times we could talk about church, or about the news, or about some current event, or maybe even a deeper subject, about our observations of human nature.

Helen was interested and interesting, engaged and engaging. She was eager for what she could yet explore, eager for what she could still learn. At ninety, she began to teach herself to read braille!

Still learning. Still growing. Still growing up.

We are still growing up, all of us. Isn't that exciting! We have something to look forward to, all of us, no matter what our age. We are not finished. We are still growing, growing into wisdom and joy and love and humility. Into love and humility, humility and love, humility that is essential to love, because love is not proud.

Love is not proud.

There is a certain kind of pride in youth, pride that serves an important purpose and is in youth a beautiful thing. Pride in forging your own identity. Pride in taking ownership of the distinctive capabilities and passions and commitments that make you who you are. Pride in taking your place and making your unique contribution as a member of a family or a team or a community or a nation.

But as you grow up, you let go of some of that, not because you value yourself or your attachments any less, but because you see more, because you see and learn to value the bigger picture. That's humility: seeing yourself in the context of the bigger picture, seeing what you are and what you aren't, seeing so much more -- things and people and ways of being and doing that are entirely outside you, different from you, beyond you. And seeing that they matter, that they matter, too.

But you can't see them, you can't afford to affirm them, unless you already know who you are. That's why humility is a virtue that we must grow up into, and that's why humility is always an attribute, not of weakness, but of strength.

*He always had the nature of God,
but he did not think that by force he should try to remain equal with God.
Instead of this, of his own free will
he gave up all he had,
and took the nature of a servant.
He was humble ...*

He gave up all he had. Jesus was humble, because he could be, because he had nothing to lose, because everything he had that mattered -- the love of God his Father -- could never be taken from him. Only the one who is strong can be humble. Only the one who is secure can be humble.

Love is not proud.

You can love someone when you have something to give and aren't afraid of losing it.

You can love someone when building them up doesn't make you feel pushed down.

You can love someone when you can give yourself away without needing anything back.

You can love someone when you see them, when you see them clearly, as they are, apart from you, and when you want to do whatever you can to affirm their identity, to support their distinctive capabilities and passions and commitments, and to celebrate their unique place to this world ... in other words, when you are humble.

And this is Jesus' promise: that those who are humble will be happy. They will be blessed. Because they will inherit the earth!

The earth, this earth in all its goodness and grandeur, is not spoils to be seized by those who can conquer it. No, this earth, this earth in all its goodness and grandeur, belongs to those who can see it, who are humble enough to want no more than to be a part of it, to enjoy their small but precious place in it.

You get what you want. When you are proud, when you have to put yourself first, when you value yourself above everything else, that's what you get: your self, and nothing more. Have fun with that!

But when you are humble, when you take delight in all the wonders around you -- people, fascinating and fragile and flawed and beautiful; an earth, mysterious and mystical and majestic and vulnerable; and God, awesome and astonishing and overwhelming and all-embracing -- when you value them for who they are, when you value the earth for what it is, when you love God with all your heart, this is what you get: all of it! Those who are humble will inherit the earth, because they are the ones who recognize that they already have it.