

Down to Size

[Matthew 23:1-12]

"...all who humble themselves will be exalted."

K Karpen, Sunday, November 13, 2005
Twenty-sixth Sunday After Pentecost

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"...All who humble themselves will be exalted."

Let's talk about humility. Humility's a strange subject. Sometimes it seems that those who talk most about it know the least about it. I'll try to avoid that risk. It's obviously hard to preach a brilliant sermon on the topic of humility. So I will spare you, and offer instead a few, brief, humble thoughts.

Our word "humble" comes from the Latin word for earth—humus. It means "low to the ground, earthy." To be humble is to be down to earth, basic, straightforward. There are 3 things to know about humility, says Jesus.

1. The first thing to know about humility is that humility has less to do with what you say about yourself than with what you do. It's not so much a matter of how you talk about yourself. It's all about how you act. Jesus has issues with some of the scribes and the Pharisees because they talk a good line but don't back it up with action. Humility is a way to be & do.
2. Second, humility is about being real. To be humble is to be real. If you take nothing more from this message, you can take that. Humility is not about being less than you are, any more than it's about being more than you are. Jesus claimed the scribes and the Pharisees said the right things—but if you looked at the lives they were living there was this huge disconnect. Be real.
3. And third, humility is not all about you. Sure it's about you, but it's also about who & how you are in relation to the other people and creatures you share the universe with. It's all about the relationship.

To Jesus' way of thinking, at least the way Matthew tells the story, the scribes and the Pharisees are in the positions they're in for all the wrong reasons. The right reasons would have something to do with being with people in their struggles to know what it's about to be human and live a life faithful to God. The wrong reasons have to do with the perks of position. "They love to have the place of honor at banquets and the best seats in the synagogues and be greeted with respect in the marketplaces and to be called rabbi."

What's wrong with being called rabbi? Nothing, if that's who you are. Nothing if that's what people want to call you. It's a term of love, veneration, respect. Rabbi is Aramaic for "my great one." A lovely thing to be called if for the wrong reason. But

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it's a bit of a set-up. Rabbi is the title people gave Jesus, and it's not like he walked around saying "Don't call me that!"

I think he saw being a rabbi as being someone who knows things, as a wonderful way to end up, if you can be that without arrogance. (It's just a bad way to start out.) That's hard to do.

The early Christian community, though, was very leary of titles, even though they soon caved in. Sometimes those titles work, sometimes they fit, and sometimes they don't. Ordained leaders in the church are called "ministers," which should be a good title to keep people humble. But it's often not. Minister comes from the Latin Minor, as in minor character in a play. As in there are no small parts; only small actors.

What minister means in English is servant or slave. Someone who works for other people. It's a good description. But it's a tough thing to feel arrogant about. But we manage.

In the same way, pastor comes from pastore, "shepherd," which is OK until you remember that shepherd was the most reviled profession in the first Century Mediterranean. And until you remember that pastore comes from pascere, which means to feed. Then you're back to servant.

When I was in the ordination process, someone once asked me what I had done in my life that I thought would make me "worthy," my word, not his, of administering the sacraments, baptism and communion. I told him I had been a waiter in college. I was just being a jerk. But I've never served communion without remembering my work as a waiter.

All I really want to say to you about humility, and the thought I want to leave you with about living a humble life, is that it is all & only about living in the absence of arrogance. Without arrogance, and with a spirit of availability. I know that sounds simpler than it actually is. Living in the absence of arrogance. But oh, how sweet life would be if we would only try it. Try it as a nation. How I long for an arrogance-free America. Try it as a church. How I long for an arrogance-free United Methodist Church. Try it as individuals. How I long to be myself free of arrogance.

Do the will of the one who made us.

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Let's sing:

Humble me, humble me;

Humble me, my Lord:

Humble me, Lord, and let me do thy will.

