

## ***Humility Leads to Love***

A sermon shared with the congregation of St. Andrew's United Church

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In my vocation there are a few clergy who have a rather grand sense of their role and importance. Entering ministry for the first time, I was on a mission. The inspired sermons I would preach, people flocking to church. Then, as I prepared sermons for passages like today's, I was confronted by the vision of Jesus, of servant leadership. I'm guessing, Kevin [Dr. McCormick], that budding academics can similarly ambitious.

We need those humbling moments in life to help us grow. Greatness, as our culture teaches, can be rather one-dimensional. Success seems based on "likes" and the number of followers, rather than courage and character, integrity and humility. Ah humility – *Martin Luther regarded it as the joyful acceptance of God's will, and modern Protestant moralists identify it as complete resignation to our dependence on God.*<sup>1</sup>

All great definitions by famous theologians, but I will go with the simpler definition of humility, as *The quality of not thinking that you are better than other people.*<sup>2</sup>

It was a great theory when I was a child, but altogether different when applied in the real world. Humility cannot be learned from a textbook, really learned, it must be learned from lived experience – whether it might be difficult feedback you get from someone you respect, or the result of making a stupid comment that puts on display my ignorance. I've had these and many more moments that have humbled me.

What was your most humbling moment?

For James and John, friends of Jesus, this had to be most humbling. They projected onto discipleship a set of values that their world had taught them – greatness, power. I imagine the brothers, James and John, peasant fishing folk flattered to be hand picked by Jesus and aspiring to something of worldly respect.

Well, worldly respect was not part of Jesus' vision. His vision for leadership, perplexing to say the least: whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all.<sup>3</sup>

And to add insult to injury, the other apprentice disciples had the audacity to judge them! Who were they to judge? Meantime, again I'm imagining, Jesus rolling his eyes. Again, the leadership team is not getting the vision. Two other Gospel storytellers tell this same story, but differently. Rather than portraying the disciples themselves betraying their oversized aspirations, Matthew instead has the pushy mother of James and John making this bold request for her boys.<sup>4</sup> Luke skims over this story almost

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<sup>1</sup> Found at <https://www.oxfordreference.com>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com> - "humility"

<sup>3</sup> Mark chapter 10, verses 43, 44. New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

<sup>4</sup> See Matthew chapter 20, verse 20

completely by calling it "a dispute" over which one of the disciples would be the greatest<sup>5,6</sup>.

What is the problem with aspiration, ambition for Jesus? I wish we had him here to speak for himself, but I suspect that playing into the dream of greatness, disconnects us from the people we need around to care for us. How many cliché movies have been made about people who achieved greatness, popularity, they published and are in great demand at conferences? How does humility play into that dynamic?

Without humility, they become "jerks", to put a blunt point on it. They, and we, can become inauthentic, disconnected, unhappy. Fame, and I'm going to have to guess here, because I'm not, but fame is probably not always like that. The kind of power that James and John learned then, and the kind of greatness preached by popular culture today, has no place in what Jesus wants for us.

Leadership yes, but grounded, connected to community, and willing to learn from mistakes, learning that we are no greater than anyone else; in fact, we are servants to the world. That connectedness, humility makes it difficult to walk past a person lying on the street without noticing, grieving, praying, if not also bending down and asking how they are doing.

Imbued with such humility, my hunch is that shrugging off conflicts becomes more complicated if we care about someone. At the risk of saying this again – I suspect some of you have been here – believe that, if we are physically able, we have a responsibility to be fully vaccinated. The doctors are the authorities, I am not – full stop. I have no medical degree, but I respect the doctors I know. I also care about those around me who are vulnerable.

People I care about very near and dear to me, perhaps listening today, adamantly oppose COVID vaccinations being made mandatory. I'm frustrated, and I become entrenched myself, in a conversation that has in places become polarized. But love – what were Jesus' words, "...the greatest must be slave to all."

To love people whom I differ with doesn't mean I agree with them. But, I am connected with them, no greater, no more powerful; I stay in the conversation. Following Jesus in humility and love means that I take the extra time to teach a concept, to share a truth as I understand it. But, then I stop, take time to listen, hear the truth of another. Especially hearing truths of others with whom we differ profoundly. Amen.

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<sup>5</sup> See Luke chapter 22, verse 24

<sup>6</sup> David B. Howell. "Pastoral Reflection". Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Year B, Volume 4: Season After Pentecost 2 (Propers 17-Reign of Christ).