

PENTECOST 16A MESSAGE

Philippians 2: 1-13

Almost daily, we hear about another animal or plant species threatened by extinction – victims of ecological changes or genetic flaws, or even human sportsmanship – though fortunately, that is declining. With society changing as rapidly as it is, with technology outstripping ethics and morality, I fear we are in danger of losing some of our most precious human virtues – especially humility.

We all like to believe we're humble – we deflect a compliment or give someone else credit – but is humility a motion we go through or is it a quality we aspire to incorporate into our being?

In his letter to the Philippians, I was struck by Paul's use of the word humility. He puts an emphasis on humility as the defining characteristic of the One we worship – and he calls for us to be in the same mind as that One – Jesus. The text is about Jesus' surrender to God's will, and the pain and joy that resulted for him – the text also talks to Jesus' followers to experience that same humility.

So, what's humility? First let's define what it's not – it is not negation of oneself. It's not a sense of worthlessness. Scripture reminds us over and over that humankind is created in God's image, yes, lower than the angels, but nonetheless children of God beloved by our Creator.

Feeling worthless may be as big an affront to God as the seven vices. Nor, is humility a false lack of pride. Back in his Patriots day – if Tom Brady were to say that he's just lucky most of the time, he wouldn't be acting humbly – he would be lying. If I were to praise the late opera singer Jesse Norman, and she were to say, "It's nothing" – she would not be acting humbly. Humility is not disowning one's God given talents and abilities.

Humility is not an individual virtue. It's not a trait of personality. It's not an internal or private attitude. According to Paul writing in Philippians, humility is about how we relate to each other – how we treat one another – how we balance our own self-worth with our ideas about another's worth.

Humility is about leveling mountains and lifting up valleys and it goes even deeper than our nation's tenet that all men and women are created equally. For Christians, equality in God's sight is valid – there's an old church school song that says, "Jesus loves the little children, all the children of the world. Red, brown, yellow black and white, they are precious in his sight – Jesus loves the children of the world."

Jesus could love anyone, and we know children are a lot easier to love than many adults, and we all know the ability to love can have its limits. We can love the vulnerable, including children, because they don't threaten us, and we're willing to love another as long as it doesn't cost too much. But love as humbly serving another? Love as regarding others as better than ourselves?

Who wants to do that? Let's be truthful with ourselves – the homeless who stand on the corner begging for change seem hardly worthy to shine our shoes – and is not 'better' than you or me. We might pity him or feel sympathy or empathy for him, give him a dollar or point him to a food pantry or detox program, but regard him as better than us?

This is what God asks of us. Yes, we might not think this man is worthy to shine our shoes, but Jesus asks us to wash his feet. Even Pope Francis, at the beginning of his reign, washed feet of the homeless.

Let me share this story with you – a friend invited me to a party. I offered to help, but my assistance was declined. I was apprehensive, more so than my friend about this whole gathering because I knew

something my friend didn't – she is unconventional and not organized – and while a great friend, she did and does some bizarre things – things that keep some people at a distance.

Well, I was apprehensive about the guest list – you know how some people plan a party and invite people they are sure won't get along to see what happens? My friend invented this strategy. The guest list reminded me of Halloween meeting Disney with Nancy Regan and Gloria Steinem thrown in.

Then there was the invitation – all it said was the day and place and time – nothing about bringing a contribution for the meal, no RSVP. I suggest to my friend there were a lot of unknowns – like how many guests to plan for food and wine. She giggled and ignored me.

The morning of the party, I was nervous for my friend. I felt that I had taken on all the responsibilities for this gathering. Now my friend never asked me to worry for her, actually all she said was to come and enjoy myself.

I went through all sorts of pre party rituals – do I bring flowers, bread, wine – or nothing at all? I agonized not to arrive too early or too late because I was sure I was going to walk into a disaster –

To this day, that party remains one of the best I've ever attended. Even before I got to the door, I could hear the music – walking into the room, I heard lots of laughter, singing, and saw warmth and joy and fun that was irresistible.

I saw an acquaintance talking with someone I recognized from the homeless shelter. Clustered around a spinach dip were representatives of organizations that had stood on opposite sides of a demonstration just weeks before. Over in two armchairs were a teenager from a youth group and a resident of a retirement home.

I used to prefer hosting gatherings of people than to be a guest – that way I could attend to the ice and music and pass food rather than talk with strangers. But there was my friend working the room like a seasoned politician, making eye contact with each guest, hugging them and making them all feel welcome.

I was so curious about how it all managed to work that I stayed to the end to help clean up. In the kitchen, scraping dishes and sorting the recycling, and a bit quiet. Finally I asked my friend, “how did you do it? How did you pull off this impossible but wonderful party?”

For a bit, she just kept scraping and sorting. Then she stopped and looked at me – looking me straight in the eye she said, “I had a party because I wanted to share a good time with the people I care about. It didn’t matter to me what people wore, or brought, or RSVPd. I didn’t worry about having enough to eat or drink because those things generally work themselves out. I wanted the people I care about to meet one another and I trusted them to get along – if only for my sake. I just wanted to see everyone I cared about and to tell them and show them I loved them. Everything else was incidental.”

I haven’t forgotten that message. The whole experience has made me less anxious when I am with others. The words remind me of my priorities – that I’m to put others first and I’m to love my neighbor. Just as Jesus did. Just as Paul taught the Philippians to do. My friend no longer throws parties like that, but if she did, I’d want each of you to be there. Amen.