



Humility May Be Out of Style, but Not for Us

TEXT
Philippians 4:8–9

April 14, 2019 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

Jesus rides into Jerusalem. It was a day that they had all waited for. It was a day they had talked about around dining tables and night fires; surely there would come a day when their leader would care more about them than about being the leader.

You have that dream — unless you have completely given up on it — that someday a leader would place your needs above the leader’s needs. You know what it is like to yearn for a time when the ways of the world pay less attention to ideology and pay more attention to the circumstances of people’s lives.

Jesus rides into town, and that dream was coming true. So, people sang. They ripped palm branches from the trees and created a green carpet for the long-awaited one. They lifted their children to their shoulders, and they shouted Hosanna. By all accounts, what they noticed most about Jesus was his humility. Humility is a hard thing to pull off at any time, but particularly when you are the center of a parade. But by every account,

what they saw in him was a spirit of humility.

We have been talking about character, and I wonder if humility is where a life of character begins. Humility is not too popular these days, and I understand; it’s hard.

I was in a little village in Ghana, West Africa. Presbyterians began our mission work in Ghana almost 175 years ago. We have hospitals, schools and many Presbyterian congregations there. Carol and I visited a congregation in a small village. Before I knew what was happening, the elders of the village decided that they would make me chief of the youth.

In Ghana, the youth are anyone who isn’t counted as the elders. To make someone chief is quite a process. They brought me the chief’s stool, and the chief’s robe, and the chief’s beads, and bracelets on my wrist and powder on my face. The women were singing; the men were dancing. When it was over, I was chief of the youth. I thought we had just had a little fun. And then I walked outside the church. People on

the street started falling down on their faces and singing. Men would sweep the path in front of me. The village was buzzing. I was chief.

I was thinking, this is ridiculous ... and I was also thinking, I could get used to this. I don’t remember anyone saying to me in that moment, “You know, what strikes us the most is your humility.”

By every account, when Jesus rode into Jerusalem, what they noticed about him was his humility.

David Brooks told of a time he was in his car, and he heard a radio rebroadcast of a program called *Command Performance*. It was a radio show that went out to troops during World War II. This particular episode was the day the war came to an end in Japan. The actor Burgess Meredith read a passage written by war correspondent Ernie Pyle. Pyle had been killed just a few months before. He said, “We won this war because our men are brave and because of many other things ... we did not win because destiny created us better than all other people. I hope that

in victory we are more grateful than proud.”

Brooks turned off the radio and walked into his home where an NFL football game was on. There was a short pass to a wide receiver, who was tackled for only a two-yard gain. And then the defensive back stood and beat his chest and did a “self-puffing victory dance.” Brooks said, “It occurred to me that I had just watched more self-celebration after a two-yard gain than I heard after the United States won World War II.”¹

OK, there were parades after the war, but I take his point. We live in a day of self-celebration. Humility is a rare thing. Humility is a hard thing.

I’ve talked about humility before. For the longest time, I assumed that humble people don’t think very highly of themselves. Jon Meacham says that when George H.W. Bush was running to be the senator in Texas, his mother, after hearing a campaign ad, would call him and say, “George, stop talking about yourself.”

I have assumed that’s a good picture of humility: Don’t think too highly of yourself. But I think that misses it.

I don’t think humility is thinking less of yourself. I don’t think humility is thinking about yourself at all. Humility is not a virtue we achieve head-on. Humility is the fruit that results not when we think less of ourselves,

but when we think highly of others. When we see the good, the honorable, the beautiful in another, it humbles us. Humility is the logical consequence of loving another.

That’s what they saw in Jesus. As Jesus rode into Jerusalem, he was not thinking of himself. He wasn’t *Aw shucks. You guys leave those palm branches alone ... stop all that ... it’s just little ol’ me.* No, he wasn’t thinking about himself at all; he was thinking about them. That’s the only reason he comes into this city. He loves the city, he loves the people, he can’t stay away — even if it cost him; and he knows it will cost him everything. But still he comes because there is no power stronger than his love for them. What they saw in him was his seeing value in them. That’s what humility looks like.

I think it is seeing the value in another that is the incubator for a life of character. All other virtues — honesty, compassion, fairness, sharing — they all grow in the soil of seeing the value in another.

So, it’s a little shocking to hear these words from Paul, who writes to the church in Philippi, as he tells them, “If there is anything worthy of praise, keep on doing the things you have learned and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.” Wait, Paul, you must have missed that humility thing.

Probably. I don’t know that Paul was hesitant to talk about himself. But I want us to hear these words as we conclude this series on character. Paul actually gives us an important word. You see in Paul’s day, there was an assumption that is less widely shared today. In Paul’s day, the assumption was if we are going to live a mature life, if we are going to live a life of character, we will need exemplars. We will need to see spiritual maturity in others. Character can’t simply be in the world of ideas; no, we will need to see it lived out. We need models.

When he rides into Jerusalem, he comes to save us, to do something that no one else can do, but he also comes as our example, to show us who all of us should be. He comes as our savior and our example.

I have known many people of character in my life. They have been examples for me, teachers for me. Now, we can never find a perfect example. No one is an exemplar of all goodness. But we don’t need that. We just need to see the good in others and learn from that good.

He finished cutting my hair and said, “You part it on the right, correct?” I smiled.

Yeah, have since I was a kid. Oh, there was a two-month period in the ’70s when I tried that Jackson Browne/David Cassidy thing: parted it in the middle, but that didn’t last. I part it on the

right because as a 6-year-old, I watched my dad, with the aid of a little Vitalis, part it on the right. So, I parted my hair on the right; and on Sundays, mom would even let me use some of his Vitalis. I thought then, like I think now, he is a great man. I wanted to be just like him.

Do you have people in your life like that?

Let me tell you about my friend David. He was a one-shingle attorney in Jacksonville. His wife Winkie — yes, I'm not making that up — was quite the football fan. David was quite the cook. When the Sunday school class met for a cookout, Winkie was in the back yard with the guys debating the benefits of zone defense; David was in the kitchen swapping recipes for lemon meringue pie.

He never called attention to himself. To my knowledge, he never served on a board. He never joined a club. He never held a leadership position. He was no mover and shaker. The only thing I can tell you about my friend is that every time I asked him, "David, how are you doing?" he'd say, "I'm better now that I've seen you."

He'd say, "Oh good, you are here. I've been wanting to talk with you. Do you have a minute? Tell me about everything," he'd say.

He went to the doctor because he had a cough. Within a week, he was gone.

We held his service, and we couldn't get everyone in the church. There were leaders of the community, and there were people that no one else knew. People who couldn't get inside stood outside in the Florida heat because ... well, because he convinced us he was better when he saw us. I think that's what the crowds saw in Jesus that day. Humility is the fruit that results when we see what is lovable in others.

Jesus came as our example, but we also need to see how Jesus shows up in others. No one is going to get it perfectly, but there are those who get enough right that they can be our teachers.

I think of some of you who have been my teachers.

I think of Dave Lillard and the rest of you who spend Tuesdays and Thursdays building Habitat houses.

I think of Edie Hultman and the rest who spend Tuesday mornings around sewing machines, so that little ones, and cold ones, and forgotten ones in our city can receive a gift when they need it most.

I think of Phil and Jeanne Hendrickson, who want more than anything for there to be a Presbyterian witness at Antioch and who have given so much to make it possible.

I think of Anne Gall and Mark Bonavia and the rest of you who show up every week as part of the memorial guild

to make sure that those with broken hearts know we are here.

I think of Andrea Chamblin, who goes to Kenya and then goes to the Mexican border because she knows that folks can be lonely when they think the world has forgotten them.

I think of Helen Hogan, who just lit up every time she walked in this place, because she knew Village was family.

I think of Tessie Young, who we committed to glory yesterday. She spent most of her life in the shadows, serving, supporting, encouraging and raising children who love the church.

I think of these people, and I want to be just like them.

I think Paul would teach us, keep on doing the things we have seen in Jesus, but not only in Jesus, keep on doing the things of Jesus we have seen in others, and that is how we will live a life of character.

And as Paul says, the God of peace will be with us.

¹David Brooks, *The Road to Character* (2015), pp. 3–4

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.