

Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

August 28, 2022

Divine Humility

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Sisters and brothers, my siblings in Christ; grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

What an amazing text for mirror-work again! So much of what Jesus teaches his followers has to do with self-reflection and pursuing a deeper understanding of humanity-as-it-is versus humanity-as-it-was-created-to-be. The mirror-work this time has to do with humility, an ideal that most of us find exceedingly difficult to live out.

Part of the reason we struggle so much with humility is because we have lots of different ways to express false humility. Think about what Jesus says about the falsely pious and their propensity for public prayer: "And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward."¹ Those hypocrites want their piety to be seen, and that makes the ends tainted by the means...they've "received their reward" means that their being seen praying is all that their prayers will accomplish.

We regularly do the same thing with humility. We act in ways society deems humble in order to be seen as humble. This is so common, especially on social media, that it led to the creation of the term "humblebrag." Something you can see all over Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc. Jesus identifies these ways in which we deceive others as hypocrisy, one of the charges he often levels against others in his teaching and preaching.

If Jesus is so clearly concerned about hypocrisy, and humility is one way in which we can be hypocritical, then we need to explore how hypocrisy functions. It seems as though humanity can make hypocrisy out of anything. Jesus pointed out hypocrisy when it came to piety, compassion, wealth, and humility. And how does hypocrisy function in those areas? It all has to do with

¹ Matthew 6:5 (NRSV)

intent...with authenticity or truth. Any good thing can be twisted into the evil of hypocrisy simply by not being authentic about your intentions.

So how do we avoid hypocrisy? Back to mirror-work! We need to be aware enough of who we are that we can be authentic about why we do the things we do. A truly humble person is one who is also a truly authentic person. Just as a truly pious person is also an authentic person. Really...a truly *anything* person is an authentic person. Authenticity is simply living out truth. But authenticity is rare enough that we may not even understand what we're seeing when we encounter it in someone.

CS Lewis does a wonderful job of illustrating what a truly humble person might seem like to most of us. In *Mere Christianity* he writes:

“Do not imagine that if you meet a really humble man he will be what most people call ‘humble’ nowadays: he will not be a sort of greasy, smarmy person, who is always telling you that, of course, he is nobody. Probably all you will think about him is that he seemed a cheerful, intelligent chap who took a real interest in what you said to him. If you do dislike him it will be because you feel a little envious of anyone who seems to enjoy life so easily. He will not be thinking about humility: he will not be thinking about himself at all.

If anyone would like to acquire humility, I can, I think, tell him the first step. The first step is to realise that one is proud. And a biggish step, too. At least, nothing whatever can be done before it. If you think you are not conceited, it means you are very conceited indeed.”²

So, by that metric, an authentically humble person won't be thinking about humility at all. I think that same argument can be applied to the other areas of common hypocrisy I've mentioned already too. A truly pious person won't be thinking about piety, a truly honest person won't be thinking about honesty, a truly...well, you get the idea. Authentic people know who they are and know why they do the things they do...which means they don't have to try to be anything other than who they are. They don't have to dwell on appearing a certain way to others because they only care about appearing to other as authentically themselves.

² Lewis, C. S. “Book 3, Chapter 8, The Great Sin.” *Mere Christianity*, Harpercollins Publishers, 2017.

We can apply this same thinking to the second part of Christ's teaching as well. After Jesus teaches the guests about humility, he then teaches the host about hospitality. And once again, it has to do with authenticity...with truth. If a host only invites people to a gathering in order to get invited back, then they are not being authentically hospitable, are they? Authentic hospitality would mean inviting any and everyone to the gathering without concern over reciprocity. Radically authentic hospitality of the sort Jesus practices would be to invite those whom everyone else excludes from community, those who most need to be welcomed and shown hospitality.

It almost seems as though to walk the Way of Christ **requires** authenticity; which certainly explains why hypocrisy is one of the things that seems to upset Jesus the most. Heck, I'm even of the opinion that it was the hypocrisy of the abusive money-changing system for Temple sacrifice that led to Jesus overturning tables and making himself a whip more than anything else! Jesus wants us to be who we were made to be; and every act of hypocrisy impedes this goal.

And so Jesus uses the occasion of a meal at a Pharisee's house to invite his followers to mirror-work...the work that allows us to move towards authenticity. We cannot be either humble or hospitable unless we understand what those values actually are and then examine whether they are motivating our actions or not. Every opportunity for mirror-work is an opportunity to walk the Way of Christ, an opportunity to understand a bit better who we were created by God to be, and then try to be that.

This work is not easy, for we cling to our hypocrisies very tightly at times, but it is the most important work we can do. This work involves confronting ourselves with the truth of God, the truth of who God created us to be and how far from that we stray. But this difficult work leads us into deeper and more profound relationships: with God, with our neighbors, and even with creation. It is the work that will shape us into Christians... "little Christs." It is the work that leads to **shalom**, to peace, wholeness, and truth.

And it is only through this mirror-work, through seeking to be who God created us to be, that we can even begin to be truly humble, or hospitable, or pious, or compassionate, or true. Mirror-work lies behind all of our efforts to serve the Gospel. How else can we pray "your will be done" unless we've explored our own wills? How else can we walk the Way of Christ unless we see how we've strayed from it? How else can we avoid hypocrisy unless we

see what truly motivates us? I don't know about you, but I've got a lot of work to do...Amen.