

True Humility
18 Pentecost; September 27, 2026
Saint John's Episcopal Church
Exodus 17:1-7; Psalm 78:1-4, 12-16; Philippians 2:1-13; Matt 21:23-32

Paul's letters are the earliest Christian writings that we have. They mostly come from the mid-fifties CE. Of course, the Gospels record events that happened before that. But the Gospels were written down after Paul's death. Paul's letters are as close as we come to the time of Jesus' own ministry.

That gives all of Paul's letters special interest. But our reading for this morning is among the most interesting. Scholars believe that Paul is quoting a Christian hymn. It's like me saying, in the middle of a sermon "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me." I don't have to tell you that I'm quoting a hymn. You just recognize the words.

Probably the same is true for our passage, which makes our passage the earliest Christian hymn we have, probably the earliest Christian writing of any kind that we still have.

And this very earliest part of our tradition is all about humility.

Christ Jesus, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death— even death on a cross.

It goes on. After Christ's death on a cross, he was highly exalted. But for this morning, I want to focus on the first half of the hymn, the humbled-himself, took-the-form-of-a-slave, obedient-to-the-point-of-death part.

Paul tells us we are to have the same mind as Christ Jesus, to follow Christ's example, to humble ourselves as Christ did.

But Christian humility is often misunderstood. Whether or not they advocate Christian humility, many people assume that humility means thinking badly about ourselves. That's not exactly right.

One of my mentors defined humility as the ability to see ourselves as we truly are. Not thinking of ourselves as better than we are, which is pride and which is common. But also not thinking of ourselves as worse than we are.

Start with the problem of pride. In contemporary America, we are not big on humility. We admire the biggest and the best and the strongest and the richest. Public figures in America tend to present themselves as God's gift to the world, and that attitude trickles down to many of us.

But Scripture repeatedly reminds us that we are not God.

The words "human" and humility" are related, and both come ultimately from the word for dirt, like humus. Humility is the recognition that God created us from dust, and that we will eventually return to the dust. It's good to remember that, particularly in creation season. Despite how we sometimes act, we are enmeshed in the web of God's creation and utterly dependent on it.

That fact about our humanity should humble us. And because many of us are tempted to forget it, Paul tells us to have the mind of Christ Jesus, who really was God, but still willingly humbled himself to serve and suffer and die with us.

But in Church, we can go to the opposite extreme. In Church, we sometimes act as if Christian humility means insisting on our own wretchedness and powerlessness.

Last week I was reading the sayings of the desert fathers, monks of the early Church who retreated into the desert to devote themselves fulltime to prayer and fasting. The desert fathers were VERY big on humility, and for them, humility meant an intense focus on their own sinfulness, I think sometimes an exaggerated focus on their own sinfulness.

In one story, a monk nicknamed Macarius the Great (he didn't call himself that!), said that once when he was a child, other children stole a few figs. As the other kids ran away, they dropped one, and Macarius ate it. Decades later, Macarius confessed, "Every time I remember this, I sit down and weep."¹

¹ Sayings of the Desert Fathers, 136.

It is good to repent of our sins, even the small ones. But I'm guessing that, after decades of Macarius repenting for that fig, God had forgiven him.

At some point, holding on to our sins is itself a problem. At some point, we have to trust God's forgiveness and grace. It sounds like poor Macarius was having a hard time doing that. I think that is true for many of us.

Something loosely similar happens in Churches all the time. I know lots of Christian people who hesitate to acknowledge their own giftedness, I think for fear of sounding sinfully proud.

We shouldn't be sinfully proud. But humility also includes the knowledge that God loves us, that Christ redeems us, that the Holy Spirit empowers us. God calls each of us to minister in our different ways, and God gives each of us the spiritual gifts we need for those ministries.

Refusing to acknowledge God's gifts to us, like refusing to acknowledge God's forgiveness of us, is NOT true humility. At its worst, it is a lack of faith. And it can certainly prevent us from doing the things God calls us to do.

My own tendency is to find a middle ground, which, in this case, is bad. I mostly don't focus on my lowliness or on my giftedness. I think of myself as in-between, as pretty good.

But true humility means acknowledging, with regret, our sin, our mortality, our dependence. AND true humility means acknowledging, with gratitude, God's love for us and God's gifts to us.

As always, Christ shows us the way.

As Paul emphasizes, Jesus humbled himself, above all by submitting to death on the cross. But, as we see in our Gospel reading, Jesus could also act in God's name with astonishing authority and power.

Jesus' encounter with the chief priests and elders happens during the last week of his life, in the middle of the events we commemorate during Holy Week. That's when Jesus was really emptying himself out, humbling himself to the point of death, even death on the cross.

But immediately before our passage, Jesus entered Jerusalem in triumph, went straight to the Temple, and drove out the moneychangers. That shocked the religious leadership of the city, who couldn't conceive of anyone having the nerve to do such things.

So, when Jesus returns, at the beginning of our passage, the chief priests and elders challenge him. "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?"

Jesus never gives his opponents a straight answer. But Jesus doesn't back down either. Instead, Jesus pushes back, hard, for the rest of this chapter and for the next two. We'll hear Jesus' push-back over the next few weeks. Jesus is startlingly harsh.

But even if Jesus doesn't explicitly answer their question, we know the answer. Jesus acted with the authority of God.

We mostly don't get to enter cities in triumph, or drive moneychangers out of churches, or engage in highly publicized arguments with our leaders. And we need to be cautious before claiming to know God's will.

But, just as Jesus humbled himself and still spoke and acted with authority when he was doing God's will, so we should be humble and also capable of acting with courage and conviction when we believe it is God's call to us.

So, I invite you this week to spend a little time reflecting on your sense of yourself. Are you tempted by pride? Are you more inclined to deny your own giftedness? Do you split the difference as I tend to?

Then ask God to give you true humility.

In Christ's name. Amen.