

Greenhills Community Church, Presbyterian

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Humility in Action

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For many years, I have tried to live the words of I Thessalonians 5:16-19 – **“Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus. Do not quench the Spirit.”** I believe joy, prayer and thanksgiving all come from a place of love. The love that comes from God as John told us in his first letter **“Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God...There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment.”** This love comes with forgiveness. With God’s love, we can believe without fear. Experiencing God’s perfect love drives away humiliation and the fear it arouses, replacing that fear with humility. Practicing humility is demonstrating that we have laid down our fears, that we have all we need in God’s love. In Isaiah 43:1 we are told **“Do not fear; for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine.”**

“Blessed are the poor in spirit” Who are the **“poor in spirit”**? In our society, we tend to think of the word poor in terms of finances or, perhaps, health. The Greek word for poor isn’t only financial, but also **“miserable; oppressed; humiliated”**. When we rely on God rather than ourselves, we turn humiliation into humility. When we are not poor, not suffering, it is easy to delude ourselves that we control our lives – that we don’t need to rely on God. But, when we are poor in spirit, we realize we need God in our hearts to move forward in life. When we accept that God knows our name – there is nothing left to prove – we discover the humility that is our utter dependence on God. In our humility, we can share God’s promise of the kingdom of Heaven. Francesca Battistelli wrote a contemporary Christian song with the following lyric **“I don’t need my name in lights, I’m famous in my Father’s eyes. Make no mistake, He knows my name.”**

“Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.” We tend to forget the timeline of the writing of the Gospels. The Gospel of Matthew was written around 60 to 65 A.D. When written, Jesus’ followers had been mourning the deaths of many of their brothers and sisters. Jesus had suffered, Stephen and James had been martyred, Peter and Paul had been imprisoned, Christians had suffered at the hands of Nero. Theologian Richard Rohr tells us **“The weeping mode allows one to carry the dark side, to bear the pain of the world without looking for perpetrators or victims, but instead recognizing the tragic reality that both sides are caught up in. Tears from God are always tears for everybody.”** With this kind of mourning comes forgiveness and in forgiveness, there is healing.

In 2006, Charles Roberts killed 5 children and himself in an Amish schoolhouse in Pennsylvania. A father of one said of forgiveness, **“But you see, it’s a journey... it took me a few years until I could feel that I really meant it inside me, to forgive Charlie. I felt a great weight falling off me. I felt lighter.”** This is mourning, and with this forgiveness comes comfort. This doesn’t mean people are not held accountable for their actions, but that we mourn the darkness in their souls. That we pray for them to find the light. That we find comfort when we turn to God. The most telling tale of mourning is contained in the shortest of all Bible verses, **“Jesus wept.”** Even though Jesus knew he could raise Lazarus from the dead, he wept at the death of his friend, he wept at the sorrow of those at hand. Jesus understands the depth of our mourning and so we find comfort in Jesus.

“Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.” Meekness means being patient, gentle and kind with others, being humble. Near my home, there is a man who stands on various, busy street corners with a bull horn calling on people to repent that the end is near. Someone who claims to know that the end is at hand is not meek. They lack humility. One of the Desert Monks of 4th century Egypt was Abba Macarius. He met the devil on the road, and the devil asked him, **“What is your power Macarius, that makes me powerless against you? You fast, but I never eat. You keep vigil, but I never sleep. In one thing only do you beat me, your humility. Because of that I can never beat you.”** The devil can’t win because Macarius walks humbly with God – and this is what the Lord requires of us. The prayer of the tax collector in Luke 18:13 is the perfect description of meekness, of humility: **“God, have mercy on me, a sinner.”** And we are all sinners.

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.” The Psalmist shares **“As a deer longs for flowing streams, so longs my soul for thee, O God.”** But instead of thirsting for righteousness, we believe we can fill our emptiness with things. But what we often refer to as retail therapy will inevitably disappoint us and leave us emptier. The ways of this world are not the ways of God...from Isaiah 55:8-9 **“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the Lord. As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.”** Although we are never filled in this world, when we stop being consumed by the endless choices in front of us and focus on living the life God calls us to live, the emptiness diminishes, replaced with the love and fullness of God. St. Augustine wrote: **“for he that thirsteth in this world, in the world to come shall be satisfied.”**

“Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.” In the Lord’s prayer we pray: **“forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors”**. Forgiveness comes with forgiving, mercy comes with being merciful. The Greek word for mercy comes with the connotation of pouring out. James Howell, in his book *The Beatitudes for Today*, says: **“Mercy is when I unscrew the lid on what is precious to me and pour it out on you. I may not think I have all that much to pour out, but the merciful pour anyway, thinking only of the wounded one who needs the healing balm of mercy.”** Being merciful is the ultimate demonstration of humility, no longer concerned with the concept of sin, but rather, concerned with providing comfort. Mercy is the thing that prompts you to drop everything to care for someone else – like the Good Samaritan who, unlike the priest and the Levite, didn’t care about the inconvenience, about soiling himself with someone unclean or payments to an innkeeper.

We need to be merciful with ourselves for our own shortcomings. Sometimes, we are more unforgiving toward ourselves than anyone else. How many thoughts go through your head, chastising yourself – things you would never say to or about someone else. C.S. Lewis regards this refusal to forgive ourselves as holding ourselves in higher authority than God. If God forgives us and we don’t forgive ourselves, are we saying we know better than God? Forgiveness, to others and ourselves, is a demonstration of humility.

“Blessed are the pure of heart, for they will see God” Our pure heart is the heart that has found God, that has accepted God into our heart. Pure of heart means focusing on God instead of being scattered. When Jesus visits the family of Lazarus, Martha complains about Mary not helping her prepare the meal – Mary is sitting at the feet of Jesus listening to his every word. Jesus says: **“Martha, Martha, you are worried and upset about many things, but few things are needed – or indeed only one. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her.”** Mary is pure of heart, focused only on her Lord. This pure heart, this pure love, is what lets us shine like beacons to others. The pure of heart practice Sabbath, spending time with God – in

prayer, in contemplation, in study. Purity of heart allows us to realize that the only thing we need is God. Jean Leclercq relates the legend that when St. Thomas Aquinas was on his death bed, a voice was heard from above: **“Thomas, you have written well of me. What reward would you ask for yourself?” And Thomas replied, “Nothing but yourself, O Lord.”** The pure of heart see God in their neighbor, just as Jesus tells us: **“Truly, I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.”**

“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God” Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German theologian hanged in association with the failed bomb plot against Hitler, said **“There can only be...peace when it does not rest on lies and injustice.”** Jesus said in Matthew 10:34 **“I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.”** Jesus upset the status quo of the Roman Empire. His sword was metaphorical – his sword was his words of community and love; his sword was his actions of healing and compassion, his sword was his suffering so that all the people would know that Jesus understands our suffering.

Mother Teresa was a peacemaker in the slums of Calcutta. Martin Luther King was a peacemaker telling us **“Love is the only force capable of transforming an enemy into a friend.”** Abraham Lincoln, president during the most devastating war in our nation’s history, asked, **“Do I not destroy my enemies when I make them my friends?”** None of these peacemakers sat back and hoped for things to change. Just like Jesus, they took action. But forgiveness is at the root of peacemaking. Bonhoeffer said: **“The forgiveness of sins still remains the sole ground for peace.”** James Howell refers to forgiveness, the basis of all peacemaking, as a commitment to look at others **“through the eyes of God”**.

“Blessed are those who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” Remember, when the Gospel of Matthew was written some 30 years after Jesus’ death, Jesus’ followers knew what persecution looked like. In Peter’s first letter he said **“If you do suffer for righteousness’ sake, you will be blessed.”** God calls us to disturb the status quo. Martin Luther said 500 years ago **“When the Devil harasses us, we know ourselves to be in good shape.”** When we are scorned for our beliefs, for acting on our beliefs, we know we are doing right. When we are doing our best in following Jesus, we will often encounter our worst days. So, what are we willing to risk to be followers of Jesus? Martin Luther King said, **“If you haven’t found anything worth dying for, you haven’t found anything worth living for.”** In the Book of Daniel, there is the story of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. King Nebuchadnezzar ordered them thrown into the furnace for not worshipping the gods he made. They believed God would save them from the fiery furnace, but had the humility to say: **“But even if He does not, we want you to know, your Majesty, that we will not serve your gods...”**

Our reading this morning from Romans is often referred to as “Love in Action” – Paul’s instruction on how to live the Beatitudes. Look, all the Beatitudes are included in Paul’s words. I believe love, forgiveness and humility are intertwined. Can we love without being forgiving and humble? Can we truly forgive without love and humility? Can we be humble if we don’t love and aren’t willing to forgive. The Beatitudes are a ladder, each rung encouraging us to be more loving, more forgiving and more humble. We live God’s love when we focus on living the Beatitudes rather than sitting in judgment on how others live their lives. When our validation comes from the knowledge that we are the children of God, our fear disappears. Without that fear, we can humbly accept that all we are comes from God, allowing us to live the Beatitudes. Amen.