

Pillars of Joy: Humility

Philippians 2:3-11

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These last few weeks have been painful for many in our country. A year after the death of George Floyd, the trial of the police officer who killed him, Derek Chauvin, began on March 29th. As the prosecution made its case, we again saw the video of George Floyd pinned to the ground with Derek Chauvin pressing his knee into the back of Floyd's neck. We heard testimony from witnesses who described the event and from the police chief saying that Chauvin had broken a number of department policies. We saw the grief of Floyd's brother as he spoke about who George Floyd was - his character and personality - and felt our anger rise as a cardiologist testified that there was no evidence that Floyd's death was caused by anything other than the pressure exerted on his neck by Chauvin.

And then, in the midst of all of this, last weekend, another young black man, Daunte Wright, was killed by a white police officer just a short distance from where the Chauvin trial was taking place.

So, yes, this has been a time of anger and grief and, for people of color, fear and fury. And, all the while in the background, is the worry what the end of the trial might bring.

All of this might make a sermon about joy feel insensitive. I've given that a lot of thought and, if this sermon was about humor and laughter as last week's was, I might agree. But, our current sermon series is based on *The Book of Joy*, written by His Holiness the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Desmond Tutu specifically to address the question of how we nurture a deep sense of inner joy in the midst of suffering and hatefulness and fear and all that living in this broken world brings us. They seem to me to be uniquely qualified to help us during this painful time. Both are spiritual leaders and men of color. One was exiled from his home to live out his life in India. The other witnessed unbearable atrocities as he worked to end apartheid in South Africa. Surely, they have something to offer us as sustenance for our souls as we struggle with all that is happening around us.

Much of the first half of *The Book of Joy* addresses those emotions that stands between us and joy - many of which we've experienced in these recent weeks and in this year of Covid. Despair, grief, frustration, anger. These two wise men don't skirt around or deny the reality of how we might be feeling. Yet, what they offer is the belief that even in the worst of circumstances, we can nurture within ourselves a sense of groundedness, of inner peace, of deep joy. They give eight tools for doing this - what they call the eight pillars of joy. Today we're going to explore one of them - humility.

One of the most insightful statements in the conversation between the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Tutu about humility as a pillar of joy is this: "Arrogance is the confusion between our temporary roles and our fundamental identity." In other words, when we focus on our roles in life and the status, power or influence those roles give us, we are more likely to see ourselves as superior to another individual or group. The Dalai Lama describes how he came to understand this for himself. "When I was young and had to give some formal teachings, because I was not

thinking we are all same, I would experience anxiety. I would forget that I'm just talking as a human being to fellow human beings. I would think of myself as something special, and that kind of thinking would make me so isolated. It is this sense of separateness that isolates us from other people.”

When we focus on our own egos and our roles, our fear of failing leads us to feeling isolated from others. And when we become isolated and fearful, we become increasingly blind to the value and worth of others. Says the Dalai Lama, “When we meet anyone, first and foremost we must remember that they, too, have the same desire to have a happy day, a happy month, a happy life. And all have the right to achieve it.”

I think many of us struggle with this interplay between our egos, our roles, and our fears in our daily lives. Whether it is in how we parent or how we do our work, our pride can interfere with the compassionate and respectful relationships we want to have. For example, those of us who have a performative element to our work – musicians, professors, and preachers to pick a few random examples - need to have a certain amount of ego to get up in front of people and do what we do. Yet, when that ego, the desire for recognition or success becomes too great, we can damage our relationships with colleagues, students, or parishioners. Of course, we see this in many other roles, as well - doctors, administrators, and, to return to the Chauvin trial, police officers.

On the other hand, when we focus not on our success, ego, or ambition, but on our fundamental identity, humility naturally follows. Our fundamental identity is as human beings and children of God. “When we realize that we are all children of God,” the archbishop says, “and of equal and intrinsic value, then we don't have to feel better or worse than others.”

The word humility comes from the Latin word *humus*, which means earth or soil. Humility brings us back to earth, to the ground, to the basics of who we are and what it means to be human.

Humility is also a cornerstone of our faith when we seek to follow Jesus. The apostle Paul describes this in Philippians 2:3-11 - our scripture reading for the day. Philippians is generally seen as the warmest and friendliest of Paul's letters to the early Christian communities he founded. You can hear Paul's love and concern for this group of people. Yet, in reading Philippians, it quickly becomes clear that some in the Philippian church were struggling with pride, and pride was interfering with the community's unity. So, Paul writes this letter to challenge them to be like Jesus. “Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit,” he says, “but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.” Then, Paul goes on to quote from a very early Christian hymn that describes how Jesus, the Son of God, who could have great power and privilege, let's go of all of that and empties himself of that power to become one of us. He is so humble that not only does he become one of us but he dies a horrendous death on a cross for our sake.

This humility is our calling as people who follow Christ - to constantly seek to let go of status, power, privilege, and pride. In his essay on Philippians 2, commentator Scott Hoezee says, “We are called to humility—a humility that, unlike pride, connects us to others. Pride isolates.

Pride arrogates everything to one's self. Humility alone leads to service, to love, to kindness—indeed, to LIFE itself.”

Archbishop Tutu picks up a similar theme. “As human beings we can't solve everything or control all aspects of life. We need others.” “Our vulnerabilities, our frailties, and our limitations are a reminder that we need one another: We are not created for independence or self-sufficiency, but for interdependence and mutual support.”

Imagine the difference it could make in our lives, country, and world if in our interactions with each other, we didn't seek to be better or more powerful than the other and we didn't focus on pride, ego, or fear but rather we approached each other from a place of Christ-like humility and mutual respect. Imagine how the encounter between Derek Chauvin and George Floyd might have been different.

And, as Earth Day approaches, imagine the difference it could make for our planet if we lived as though the earth has the same intrinsic and divine worth we do. If we approached the decisions we make about how we live our lives understanding that the earth is as intrinsically valuable to God as we are.

To do this, we start by learning to be secure in ourselves. If arrogance and the need for status or power begin with insecurity and fear, the antidote, the key to humility, is to accept ourselves. “So many people, the Dalai Lama says, “seem to struggle with being kind to themselves. This is really sad. You see, if you don't have genuine love and kindness toward yourself, how can you extend these to others? We must remind people, as the Archbishop has said, that basic human nature is good, is positive, so this can give us some courage and self-confidence. As we said, too much focus on yourself leads to fear, insecurity, and anxiety. Remember, you are not alone. You are part of a whole generation that is the future of humanity. Then you will get a sense of courage and purpose in life.”

Yes, this is still a time of grief and uncertainty with Covid numbers climbing and the painful events of the last few weeks. But, we are part of a movement that began with Jesus Christ. A movement that has grown over centuries and around the globe. A movement that teaches that when we humble ourselves and we open our eyes to the intrinsic worth of every person, we can help to grow the kingdom of God. We can change the world. After all, Jesus did.

May it be so. Amen.