

“Humility - Spiritual Limbo”

April 22, 2018

Witness series – 4th Sunday of Easter

I invite you to see this video called “Authenticity.” **SHOW VIDEO**

Maybe you feel like I did when I first watched it. This is authenticity? Not quite, but then there’s an admission of how difficult life can be and how difficult faith can be. Eventually we get some honesty instead of trying to hide behind a facade or trying to create a perfect image. Finally we get to what we’re talking about today - humility.

Authenticity is that quality of being real and genuine. And usually we know it when we see it. The same goes for humility. We know it when we see it, but humility is a quality that comes from a sense of who we are in relationship to God and to others. It’s not that we put ourselves down and offer a sense of “false humility;” it’s really having a sense of how we’re connected to one another. The young man in the video moves toward greater humility when he’s honest about himself and his relationships. Maybe we’ve asked that same question: *If they really knew me and my struggles, would they like me? Could they love me?*

C.S. Lewis has a great way of describing it: **SHOW SLIDE** "Humility is not thinking less of yourself, but thinking of yourself less." I like that - not putting ourselves down, but paying attention to how we see ourselves in relationship to others. Webster says humility is a low view of one’s importance and a freedom from pride and arrogance.

I did a quick survey on Facebook and asked people for examples of humility. Here are a few: Mr. Rogers, gentle souls, former president Jimmy Carter, Desmond Tutu, Mother Teresa, Mary (mother of Jesus), and, of course, Jesus. And yes, Pastor Susan Hagans did quote a song that I’m sure is playing in someone’s head right now:

*Oh Lord it's hard to be humble
When you're perfect in every way
I can't wait to look in the mirror
Cause I get better looking each day
To know me is to love me
I must be a heck of a man
Oh Lord It's hard to be humble,
But I'm doing the best that I can*

Humility literally comes from the Latin root that means “dust” or “dirt,” so there’s a sense that we’re called to do the spiritual limbo - to get low. And yet, the writer of First John invites us to consider who we are because of God’s love for us.

We are children of God because of God's love for us - not because we're good enough or smart enough or good-looking enough or educated enough or anything else "enough."

Authenticity takes work and vulnerability - getting real with each other is risky stuff. And humility requires some vulnerability, too. Humility is risky, and in a time when there's pressure to project a perfect image or a tendency to put others down in the world of social media, humility seems like a novelty. We either see bad examples of what it means to follow Jesus - full of hatred and judgment - or false impressions that everything is perfect and that there are no problems.

But as we consider our witness to the world, humility is vital. If we want to make disciples, then we have to claim that our witness is important. **SHOW SLIDE** Robert Murray M'Cheyne says, "The Christian is a person who makes it easy for others to believe in God." That's the question for us: Are we making it easier (or harder) for others to believe in God?

If I asked you to turn to someone near to you and describe who you are, it's easy enough, right? But there's a catch - you can't say anything about your work or what you do. It's hard, isn't it? So much of how we describe ourselves is wrapped up in what we do. And I'll confess that the first thing I'd probably say to introduce myself is that I'm a United Methodist pastor. There's nothing wrong with claiming our work as important. But we don't talk about who we are very often.

And the writer of First John is concerned about that. We're reading someone else's letter probably written around 100 AD by a leader in the early church - someone who had helped to establish this congregation. And now, there's division among the people, and there are competing voices in the congregation. People are in disagreement about who Jesus is and what it means to follow him.

The beginning of the letter assures the congregation that even though they hadn't been the first witnesses to the resurrection, they could believe in the resurrection because there were people who had seen it and had interacted with the risen Jesus. And because they believed that Jesus was truly raised from the dead, they could trust that God called them to live with a new hope and confidence in God's power to overcome death and despair. Their witness was important!

So today the letter moves from talking about the power of our witness to what actually happens in our faith life because of the resurrection. First of all, we have to claim who we are. We are children of God. But it's not simply because God is our Creator. We claim the gift of being named and claimed by God. It's an incredible gift! Now the audience receiving this letter was a mix of Jewish and Gentile Christians. Both Jews and Gentiles might have been rejected by others who shared their same ethnic heritage, but their faith in Jesus gave them a new identity - children of God.

Actress Jeanette Clift George tells the story of a woman and her baby, flying home on a very turbulent flight. Every time the baby cried, the young mother fed the baby a little fruit and a little orange juice, but because the flight was so bumpy, everything that went down came back up. At the end of the flight, the carpet was a mess, and the baby looked awful.

At the gate was a young man who had to be Daddy: white pants, white shirt and flowers. Jeanette George thought to herself, “He’s going to run to that baby, get one look and keep running!”

Of course, he didn’t. He grabbed the messy baby, held her against his white shirt and whispered loving things in her ear. All the way to the luggage claim area, he never stopped hugging and kissing that baby, stroking her hair, welcoming her back home.

Jeanette George says, “Where did I ever get the idea that my Father God is less loving than a young daddy in white slacks and white shirt?” Our God has chosen to make us children and will embrace us and accept us with open arms, no matter how messy we are.

And notice that First John points to the community as a whole - **we** are God’s children. Again, there’s a call to humility here. Each of us is loved by God for who we are, and we’re called to witness. But we’re called together to witness to the power of God to bring new life from death.

We don’t choose God; God chooses us. We don’t earn our place within God’s family. Remembering the difference God’s holiness and our humanity is a start to humility. We sang it earlier: “Behold, what manner of love the Father has given unto us that we should be called the children of God!” Without humility, we point to ourselves. With humility, we point to God.

And yet, there’s something mysterious about it. We don’t have the full vision of what it means to be children of God. That will only come when the Kingdom of God comes in its fullness. One writer compares it to a parent and child relationship where children know and experience the benefits of love from their parents, and yet it isn’t until later on that the depth of that love is better understood.

I thought of that this week as I got together with my mom. I’m 41, and she can’t believe that, but she’s still my mom. Our relationship is different than it was when I was younger, but she’s still my mom. I understand better the depth of her love for me as I learn to love my family and others more deeply. We are children of God now, but we know there’s more to come, and we wait for it with hope.

And in the waiting, there’s a call to live as children of God. If we claim to be children of God, then we have to act like it! And that requires a sense of humility - freedom from our focus on our own ego and the blessing of being better able to love

others well. If we claim to be loved by God, then we have to love. If we claim to have a relationship with God, then we have to show it in how we live.

And we're honest about sin and repentance. It's easy to turn off our ears when it comes to those words, but Jesus talked about sin and repentance constantly, and he didn't do it to strike fear in people. He talked about it because it's the truth – we are sinners who need to understand how much we need God. God never leaves us, but we do plenty of things to move away from God. Jesus' call to repent is an offer of hope to all people. We can come back to God!

Claiming the resurrection of Jesus from the dead changes our lives. If we believe in the power of God to raise Jesus from the dead, we can claim the power of God to help us to overcome the power of sin. So that should affect how we live – everything we do or don't do. We have to think about how our faith and actions go together.

Now at the beginning of this letter to the early church, the writer expressed hope that these words would encourage folks not to sin. But there was also the assurance that Jesus is our Advocate before God – the One to speak for us and the One to reconcile us to God. Here we read that sin is lawlessness, and that sin in our lives is a sign that we don't know Jesus.

That may sound like two different messages, but the intent is to make us realize that claiming to be a child of God means that we're paying close attention to how we live. If we're seeking to grow in our relationship with God through Jesus Christ, then we should be trying our best to do what it right. We should be aware of sin in our lives, actively seek to rid ourselves of it, and be willing to confess it freely so that we can be more closely connected to God.

Friends, Easter is a glorious celebration of God's desire for life and hope. And it's a season of time and a way of life as we witness to the resurrection and what it means to our lives. So I pray that we get real (be authentic) and practice our spiritual limbo (get low) remembering God's amazing grace in claiming us as beloved children. May that recognition and that remembering help us to love God and love each other better.

Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Thanks be to God. AMEN.

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE