

“Greatness in Humility”

John 1:1-5, 14 Philippians 2:5-11

Scott B. Martin – March 1, 2009

Today we have two of the best-known and most majestic texts in the New Testament. They express, in a few words, the highest Christology, the highest view of Jesus as the Christ, that you can find. **“In the beginning was the WORD and the WORD was with God, and the WORD was God. All things came into being through [the Christ]....”** The writer of John believed in his heart and soul that Jesus, The Man of Galilee, somehow embodied the light and life of God, present at the very creation of the universe, and present in all of being itself. Somehow this original, creative, life giving, light bearing, be all and end all was present in a Galilean carpenter in way that no other human being, before or since has embodied. It is a breathtaking, mind boggling statement of faith, that somehow what people experience in Jesus of Nazareth is THE GOD OF THE UNIVERSE!

It is almost as if Jesus acts like a microscope in reverse. A microscope helps us see things that are so small that unaided we can not see them. It does this by magnifying them until we can see them. We have the opposite problem with God. God is SO HUGE that we can not begin to see and understand God. Yet, as Christians, we believe that Jesus’ life, death and resurrection brings into focus the very essence of God in such a way that our limited human abilities can at least somewhat apprehend God.

This provides a great contrast with to many of the Old Testament stories of experiencing God. Most of the Old Testament stories basically said human beings could not experience God, that if they met God face to face they would simply be overwhelmed and die. It is a Hollywood exaggeration

but it captures this view beautifully in the Harrison Ford movie, *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. During the dramatic conclusion of the movie the nasty Nazi's open the Ark of the Covenant. Indiana Jones wisely tells his companion to cover her eyes. The Nazi's stare at the bright swirling light that emerges from the Ark, the Spirit of God, God, and as they stare, mesmerized, their very being disintegrates, until there is nothing left of them but a pile of bones. No one can look on God and live.

What a contrast to the Christian view of looking to Jesus, seeing God, and finding true life and a peace that passes understanding. There are no pyrotechnics here, no burning bushes, no thunder clouds, no pillars of fire or disembodied voices; instead what one has is a Galilean carpenter who went about spreading the good news of the Kingdom of God, healing people, and after a very short ministry, was crucified by the powers that be, only to be raised from the dead by the power of God. It is this incredible synthesis of God the Creator and Sustainer of the Universe and Jesus, the Man of Galilee that brings about the Christ of faith.

Our passage in Philippians captures this synthesis beautiful in telling us what exactly impresses us then and now about Jesus, **"...though he was in the form of God, [he] 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."**

(Philippians 2:6-8)

We are use to the idea of talking about the love of God in Christ Jesus, and rightly so. Love is certainly a prime quality of God and certainly one of the prime qualities of God we see demonstrated in the life and death of Jesus. But along side love, Philippians quite rightly stresses the importance

of humility and humbleness. In fact we might ask is humility a product of love of neighbor or does humility make it possible to love our neighbor as ourselves? This is a real “Which came first the chicken or the egg?” question. Still, it is worth our pondering the interrelationship of humility and loving service. Christ demonstrated both. His passionate love of God and neighbor led him to the cross and even there he prayed, **“Father forgive them they know not what they do.”**

I believe I read that Krista Tippett, whose interviews for *Speaking of Faith* are aired on NPR, will be speaking at our United Church of Christ General Synod meeting in Grand Rapids this June. I am in the midst of reading her book of the same title *Speaking of Faith*. In there she says one of the most common phrases that recurs most often in her interviews on faith is the moral longing and commandment to “repair the world.” In the Jewish tradition they call this “Tikkun Olam.” There is a Jewish legend behind this notion. It says that sometime very early in the life of this world, something happened to shatter the light of the universe into countless pieces. This shattered light lodged as “sparks” inside every part of creation. The highest calling for any human being to follow is to seek to gather this light up and in so doing “repair” our broken world. Tippett concludes from this story that **“each one of us, flawed and inadequate as we may feel, has exactly what’s needed to help repair the part of the world that we can see and touch.”**

Remember how our Philippians passage opens, **“Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who ...emptied himself,...humbled himself”**. Likewise, what did our gospel passage say of Jesus? **“What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people.**

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.”

John 1:3b-5)

Recovering the shattered light scattered throughout creation and in every human being, this is our task. This cannot be accomplished by sticking rigidly to religious doctrines. This cannot be accomplished by taking doctrinaire stances on religious or social questions. This can not be accomplished by pounding our bibles both real and metaphorical, or our opponents.

I once saw a cartoon that is apropos. It showed a man looking at various people carrying various protest signs. The caption read, “Why is it I dislike so many people whose causes I believe in?” This is a good question for liberals and conservatives and everyone in-between! A better question might be, “Are we ever one of those people whose views might be “right” but who none the less are disagreeable?” This doesn’t mean one stops working for a cause one believes in, think of Martin Luther King or Gandhi; but it does mean these cause are to be pursued with love and humility and a deep sense of service to all we come in contact with.

One of the most controversial issues of our day is the whole question of human sexuality. It and abortion are right at the top of the list of issues fanning what has been called the “culture wars.” I am proud to say that Faith Church recently took a stand on this issue and I believe it is the correct stand both biblically and socially. We are now an ONA church, an open and affirming church. We may have occasion to defend or “testify” to others about our position on this matter. It is also quite possible that some of us are not wholeheartedly in favor of this stand, but no matter what side of this issue we fall on I pray that we might approach each other and others with a sense of humility, service and love.

Krista Tippet has interviewed people of faith on both sides of this issue. I'm not talking about radicals on both sides. I'm talking about people who have honestly struggled with this issue and who approach it with that attitude of humility, service and love that I just spoke of.

Let us first consider Dr. Richard Mouw, an evangelical whose credentials few could question. He is the president of Fuller Theological Seminary, the largest multid denominational seminary in the world. He does not believe the church should sanction same sex marriages, but he has spent a great deal of time in conversation with gay and lesbian people. Through these conversations and personal reflection he has arrived at what he calls "sexual humility.

He once heard a very conservative minister stand up at a meeting and say, "I think *we normal people* ought to say to these folks..." Mouw says he felt like standing up himself and screaming, "You're normal? Let's have a medal for the one normal person in the room!" He goes on to say, "I mean, normality doesn't come easy in all of this. And there's so much else that we have to admit we're broken people about. I just wish we could lower the rhetoric on this and really talk about who we are and in the broader cultural debate, where we really want to go with all of this and what our real fears- what are the hopes and fears that go into all of this- rather than just ideologically trading rhetoric." I may not agree with his overall stance but AMEN to this approach! It is exactly what is needed by people on all sides of any issue, including this one.

Dr. Virginia Mollenkott came out as a lesbian thirty years about, publishing *Is the Homosexual My Neighbor?*. Needless to say, she comes down on the other side of the question of gay marriage from Dr. Mouw. To Dr. Mouw's suggestion of "sexual humility" she adds her own longing that

in dealing with this question, or any other question, that we all approach one another **“from the holy in ourselves to the holy in the other.”**

With these two people of faith in mind, who hold opposite views on a very important issue, some would say a defining issue of our time, Tippett makes a VERY important observation for all people of faith, **“The WAY we approach our divisions, Mouw and Mollenkott suggested with one voice, is as telling a reflection of the substance of our faith as the positions we take.”** Let me say this again, **“The way we approach our divisions ... is as telling a reflection of the substance of our faith as the positions we take.”**

During this season of Lent let us draw closer to Christ Jesus. **“Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, ... who did not regard equality with God a thing to be exploited, but emptied himself, ... humbled himself, ... “Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”** Amen .