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Exodus 33:18-34:9

1 Peter 5:1-6

## DESIGNER CLOTHES: HUMILITY

A friend of mine who is a Presbyterian pastor is among the group of clergy persons who wear a clergy collar on a daily basis. He's a person who can be demonstrative when someone cuts him off in traffic. He laughs at himself saying he might be inclined to shake his fist or worse when someone is rude on the road, but then he thinks about the clergy collar that others see that he is wearing, and that gives him reason to express his anger in a less than obscene way. How are we as followers of Christ clothed and how does it affect our actions? We are in the midst of a five-week sermon series that picks up on clothing imagery used in the book of Colossians that urges people of faith to be 'clothed' not necessarily with clergy collars, but with certain qualities: compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. It is my hope that this focus will cause us to consider how we are called to act in our daily lives as Christians. Over the last two weeks, we explored the first two qualities on that list, exploring how we present ourselves, dress ourselves in compassion and kindness. It was not hard to say that God is compassionate, so we are to dress our lives in a godly way, reflecting a similar compassion. God is kind, so kindness should be a part of how others see us.

But today, we get to the third quality in the list – humility. Can we follow the pattern and say that God is humble, so our lives should reflect humility? We who are Christians would say that God coming in human form did show humility, particularly in Jesus Christ coming as a serving leader who lovingly spent time with the lowest of the low and did things like wash his followers' feet. However, in our reading from Exodus this morning, we get a sense of God's greatness rather than God's humility as even a portion of God's glory is revealed to Moses. It is a story of God's power and holiness. God is eternal; we are not. God is perfect; we are not. God has created all there is; we have not. Steadfast love is central to who

God is; that's not true for us. All of that is part of what makes sense that we are to respond to God's greatness with a degree of humility.

Let's try to define this term. Dictionaries range in defining humility, from the negative, as in not arrogant, haughty or filled with pride, to the not quite positive: showing modesty. A few centuries ago, an English philosopher named John Selden wrote, "Humility is a virtue all preach, none practice, and yet everybody is content to hear. The master thinks it good doctrine for his servant, the laity for the clergy, and the clergy for the laity." <sup>1</sup>

I'll just say that this clergy person believes humility to be a good quality for clergy and laity alike. But we together as an expression of Christ's church operate in a society where few see humility as much of a virtue. Gone are the days when your grandmother, after you had bragged to her about some accomplishment you had achieved, would look over her spectacles and solemnly quote from the book of Proverbs: "Pride goeth before a fall." <sup>2</sup> Our culture puts a high value on having it all, being it all, climbing the ladder of success even if you step on a few others along the way. Our culture values knowing the right people and making sure they know you. Whatever humility is, it is not that. The church has a calling to be counter-cultural, at least in this regard. We too want to know the right person, but that person happens to be Jesus. We are called to follow in his ways, which direct us to be humble in our relationships with God and with one another.

In our passage from First Peter, we hear that the quality of humility is a good kind of clothing for those who have church leadership roles. In our Wednesday bible study as we discussed these passages, we talked about how we as Presbyterians do not often take the humble stance of kneeling for prayer, except we do ask those who are being ordained as a church officer, either an elder or deacon, or when someone is ordained to serve as a minister of word and sacrament they kneel as other leaders lay hands upon them in prayer. Hopefully, such a humble stance leads to serving in leadership with humble hearts. But you will also notice that humility is suggested as clothing appropriate for all within the church, whether

they serve as officers or not. Humility is among the qualities that make it possible for us to function as a true community of faith, a community of caring.

Although we may not normally think of it this way, humility actually is a powerful quality that can enable us to express certain things that others who are arrogant or full of themselves cannot. It takes a certain humility to honestly say to another, “I’m sorry” or “Please forgive me.” Just think what the nature of a relationship is without such an ability. With humility, someone can admit a shortcoming, can admit that someone else might have a better idea than one’s own, can admit needing help. Humility opens the way for us to reject meritocracy, so we in fact can move toward valuing all of God’s children regardless of the status society has placed upon them. Having a humble heart moves us away from being prejudicial and judgmental. It enables each of us to recognize ourselves as not being the center of the universe so we can be focused on the needs of others and causes that are larger than ourselves. As a result, those who are humble can have a larger purpose for their lives and can experience a sense of gratitude to God and to others. True humility enables us to worship God instead of ourselves. It helps us be open to the guidance from God that we need, whether that comes in the form of the ten commandments or the two great commandments Jesus highlighted that instructs us to love God with all of our heart, soul, mind, and strength, and to love our neighbor as ourselves.

One writer put it this way: “we journey with Jesus into the truth about ourselves, trying to see who we are in God’s eyes, including both our strengths and our weaknesses – this is called humility. To many people, humility is synonymous with self-hatred and ‘putting yourself down,’ the opposite of self-esteem. In fact, humility is simply the opposite of the illusion that I am perfect.”<sup>3</sup> Sadly, humility has at times been preached in ways that has urged people to stay in abusive relationships or to not make full use of the gifts God has given them. I am not talking today about humility as an encouragement to act like a door mat, inviting people to walk all over you. Biblical humility instead invites us to make an accurate assessment of who we are before God that neither flaunts nor deprecates our talents, abilities, and accomplishments, but accepts them for the gifts from God

that they are. C.S. Lewis is credited with putting it this way: “humility is not thinking less of yourself; it is thinking of yourself less.”<sup>4</sup> Such a quality enables us to be less selfish and more loving.

There are those who shout out their self-reliance, but who in contradiction have to inhale air from beyond themselves in order to do so. With each sip of water or morsel of food, we experience our reliance upon a world that we would affirm is made by a God who graciously supplies what we need. As we grow in our awareness of the greatness of God, we grow in humble reliance upon God that prepares us to relate humbly toward others, without taking away confidence that God can do amazing things through us as we work together as the body of Christ.

When we pay attention to who God is and to our need for what God graciously provides, then humility is a kind of clothing that fits us quite naturally. We can wear it when we are driving in traffic and when we are praying in solitude. We don’t need to wear it proudly, but it would be fitting for us to wear it each day, and by God’s grace, we can.

<sup>1</sup>Selden, John, Table Talk, 1689, as referenced at [http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/John\\_Selden](http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/John_Selden)

<sup>2</sup>Proverbs 16:18

<sup>3</sup>Albert Holtz, Pilgrim Road: Benedictine Journey through Lent, Morehouse Publishing, 2nd edition, 2006

<sup>4</sup>C. S. Lewis, Mere Christianity, HarperOne; Revised edition, 2015