

HUMILITY IS LIKE UNDERWEAR

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Text: Deuteronomy 8:7–18

Do you consider yourself to be humble? People often talk about humbling experiences. What they are often referring to is humiliation. Being humiliated is not the same as being humble. Humble is something you are; humiliation is something you feel.

In our text from Deuteronomy, the author is recounting how God is going to bring about good things: good land, flowing rivers and plenty of good food. But (and there is always a *but*), but the author implores the reader to not forget from where they came. Do not forget your roots. Do not forget that it was God who brought you out of bondage. Do not forget that it was God who brought you through the wilderness, a dark time with snakes and scorpions. Do not forget that it was God who gave you water to drink from a rock and fed you with manna to humble you—and in the end to do you good. So do not say, “I made it through all these hard times with my own two hands,” but remember it is all a gift from God.

Do not think you made it on your own. We struggle with that, don’t we? We want to think that everything we have, we deserve, because we earned it. Don’t we think that the accumulation of things, of wealth, of status, of power are a result of our own hands? We worked hard to get where we are. Don’t we tend to think we are unique? Don’t we as a church tend to think we are exceptional? Every church I have served thought they were unique or exceptional in some way.

For years now, social critics have decried a rising tide of American narcissism: the antithesis of humility. Scientists are examining the cost to our psyches when we think we are exceptional and entitled as a culture. On the flip side, scientists also want to discover if there are benefits to being humble. Does humility improve relationships? Does humility improve our quality of life?

Not that long ago, on *Face the Nation*, the current President of our country said he is more humble than people knew, but he chooses not to show it as a business strategy. This reminds me of a quote from Helen Nielsen: “Humility is like underwear, essential, but indecent if it shows.”¹ That’s the paradoxical nature of humility. If you must draw attention to your humility, you are likely lacking it.

There is a great deal to be learned about true humility. The research I read suggested that humility is good for us individually and for our relationships. For example, humble people handle stress more effectively and report higher levels of physical and mental well-being. They also show greater generosity, helpfulness and gratitude—all things that can only serve to draw us closer to others. Truly humble people are able to offer a gift of non-judgement because they see and accept their own strengths and limitations without defensiveness or judgment. Another core dimension of humility, according to researchers, is that it cultivates a powerful compassion for self and others.

¹Everett L. Worthington, Jr., *Humility: The Quiet Virtue* (Philadelphia: Templeton Foundation Press, 2007), 10.

This kind of compassion and self-acceptance emerges from grounding one's worth in our intrinsic value as human beings rather than things such as six- or seven-figure salaries or a perfect body or the number of friends one has on Facebook. Instead, humble people place high value on more meaningful things that benefit others. Humble people are lifelong learners who recognize that, while none of us is perfect, we can, without negatively impacting our self-esteem, work on our limitations by being open to new ideas, advice and criticism.

Most of us have done things where we have felt humiliated. Once while driving I had a stomachache and stopped at a gas station for some Pepto Bismol. At the counter the attendant asked if I had gas. I said, "None of your business!" When I returned to the car by the gas pump, I realized that he was asking if I needed to pay for gasoline. He was asking everyone if they had gas. Momentarily humiliating! Sometimes my golf game humiliates me. (Those of you who golf will understand that.)

In our text, the story is about events that left the people of God humbled, not humiliated. There is a difference. For many years I guided wilderness trips into the Boundary Waters. After a trip, participants often reflected that the trip was a humbling experience. Sometimes it was the realization of the limits of one's strength or stamina and the need to ask for help. Sometimes it was simply looking at the star-filled sky and realizing how small we are in the universe. I wonder about the events of this year. Have they humbled us as a people? Has COVID-19 opened our eyes to how we need to protect each other? Has the racial unrest opened our hearts to the further work we need to do to become antiracist? Has our tumultuous weather strengthened our resolve to care for the earth in new ways? How can we nurture this virtue of humility?

It seems that we must first embrace our humanness. In her book *Becoming Bread*, Gunilla Norris writes a poem called "Earth," which includes the lines:

*Made from ground, sustained by ground,
we are soil. This is the first humility.
If we forget this, we forget that we are human.
We are of the land. We are humus.²*

We live our lives between the cosmos and the earth. Poised between earth and sky, we are made of earth and stardust. We seek to belong, to be of worth. We want to be seen and heard. Some of us begin from a lowly place, having been spoon-fed a sense of our own unworthiness. Others begin from higher ground, having been told again and again we are the best, the brightest, the prettiest or the wittiest. Both are true, for we are—each of us—made of earth and sky. We are both lowly and exalted. We spend our lives seeking the balance, the appropriate weight to give our worthiness. To be humble, we hold in creative tension that we are made of dust and the stuff of stars.

Humility is also a spiritual practice, but not a false humility where we intentionally devalue ourselves or our contributions in an attempt to appear humble. There is a Sufi tale about the teacher and poet Rumi that demonstrates how one might practice humility:

Once upon a time, a young man decided to leave his homeland and go to learn from the great teacher Rumi in Konya, Turkey. After weeks of arduous travel, he finally reached the outskirts of Konya and saw a gracious presence walking toward him. The young man knew in his heart that this was the famous Sufi poet, Rumi. The young man dropped to his knees before this great teacher whom he had been seeking, but as he arose, he found Rumi kneeling in the dirt in front of him.

²Gunilla Norris, *Becoming Bread* (Mahwah, New Jersey: HiddenSpring, 2003), 32.

Amazed and embarrassed, the young man again kneeled down, and again when he arose, Rumi was again kneeling before him. This happened over and over and over and over again until the exasperated young man finally said, “Why are you, my esteemed teacher, kneeling in the dust before me, a mere seeker?”

To which Rumi simply replied, “If I did not show you my nothingness, what would I be useful for?”

In our scripture, we are admonished to keep in perspective our worth by giving credit to God for all that we are and all that we have. C. S. Lewis wrote that “true humility is not thinking less of yourself; it is thinking of yourself less.”

Great leaders like Nelson Mandela and Gandhi make similar points about humility. Nelson Mandela wrote, “The first thing is to be honest with yourself. You can never have an impact on society if you have not changed yourself . . . Great peacemakers are all people of integrity, of honesty, and humility.” Gandhi once famously said, “I claim to be a simple individual liable to err like any other fellow mortal. I own, however, that I have humility enough to confess my errors and to retrace my steps.”

If Mandela and Gandhi are examples of what humble leaders can accomplish, then society serves to benefit from this kind of governance. Who would not want that kind of leadership for our country—and the world?

This is an election season, but it is more than voting for humble leaders, it is about how we each show up in the world. As Nelson Mandela said, “First be honest with yourself. You can never have an impact on society if you have not changed yourself.” So, I return to the question I started with, “Do you consider yourself to be humble?” Only you know the work you must do. Amen.