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The Federated Church of Hyannis
The Reverend Dr. John A. Terry, Pastor

THE FREEDOM OF HUMILITY

Matthew 23:1-12

And now, give us, O Lord, a steadfast heart, which no unworthy affection may drag downward; Give us an unconquered heart, which no tribulation can wear out; Give us an upright heart, which no unworthy purpose may tempt aside. Amen. (St. Thomas Aquinas, 1225-1274)

After dinner, the children turned to their father and asked if he would tell them a story. “A story about what?” asked their father. “About a giant,” squealed the children. Their father smiled, leaned against the warm stones at the side of the fireplace, and he said: “Once there was a boy who asked his father to take him to see the great parade that passed through the village. The father, remembering the parade from when he was a boy, quickly agreed, and the next morning the boy and his father set out together.

“As they approached the parade route, people started to push in from all sides, and the crowd grew thick. When the people along the way became almost a wall; the father lifted his son and placed him on his shoulders. Soon the parade began and as it passed, the boy kept telling his father how wonderful it was and how spectacular were the colors and images. The boy, in fact, grew so prideful of what he saw that he mocked those who saw less saying, even to his father, ‘If only you could see what I see.’”

“But,” said their father staring straight in the faces of the children, “what the boy did not look at was why he could see. What the boy forgot was that once his father, too, could see.” Then as if he had finished the story, their father stopped speaking. “Is that it?” said a disappointed girl. “We thought you were going to tell us a story about a giant.” “But I did,” said their father. “I told you a story about a boy who could have been a giant.”

“How?” asked the children. “A giant,” said their father, “is anyone who remembers we are all sitting on someone else’s shoulders.” “And what does it make us if we don’t remember?” asked the boy. “A burden,” answered their father, “a burden.” And that is what the law had become, a burden

resting on the shoulders of the people by leaders using their own pride to elevate themselves.

There is not a thing wrong with the Law of Moses. It lifts us up to God. Follow it and you will do right in the eyes of God. Psalm 19 declares “The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul; the decrees of the LORD are sure, making wise the simple; the precepts of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the LORD is clear, enlightening the eyes. Moreover by them is your servant warned; in keeping them there is great reward.”

Jesus did not dispute what they taught. To say that they sat on Moses’ seat meant they are truthfully proclaiming that law which God gave to Moses. It was their life that was false. They were not acknowledging they were imperfect vessels. They were telling others to do justice while they sought privilege.

The scribes and Pharisees thought of themselves as responsible to God for enforcing high standards but they made no effort to help people to attain those standards. In parenting classes there is a distinction made between the “you” messages and the “I” messages. It is the difference between “You never clean up the kitchen when you are done” and “Let me show you how I clean up the kitchen when I am done.” One accuses without offering help, the other offers guidance without accusation. There is such a world of difference between complaining and serving, between criticizing and showing one the way.

A couple of weeks ago Reverend Peter Gomes spoke here in an evening lecture. I purchased every book he has ever written for our church library. In his most recent book, *What’s So Good about the Good News*, he talks of how the Good News of Jesus has had all manner of baggage hung on it, lists of things in which we must believe and things which we must do to be a true believer. Reverend Gomes reminded us that all Jesus said is “Follow me.” Jesus did not give us a list of what we must first do and believe, just “Follow me.”

“They do all their deeds to be seen by others; for they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long.” Phylacteries are leather boxes containing scrolls inscribed with passages of scripture in accord with the Jewish law which reads, “You shall put these words of mine in your heart

and soul, and you shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and fix them as an emblem on your forehead” (Deuteronomy 11:18). In obedience to this law, the scribes and Pharisees wore phylacteries on their forehead and their arm.

The law in Deuteronomy also requires Jews to write the laws “on the doorposts of your house and on your gates” (Deuteronomy 11:20), a law that observant Jews still obey by fastening a Mezuzah containing these laws on the doorpost of their homes, identifying the home as Jewish and its inhabitants as observant. The problem is not that the scribes and Pharisees observed these laws, but that they sought personal honor for doing so. They wore especially large symbols and long tassels to draw attention to their scrupulous observance.

We do not always do well in places of honor. One Sunday when I was not preaching we took our sons to worship in a predominately African American congregation. Both of our sons became our sons by adoption and they are both biracial. They brought along a friend who is Cape Verdian. They looked much more like they belonged than I did. When the pastor of the church saw me she did what is the custom in that church – she invited me to sit up front next to her in a position of honor. Jesus warned against seeking positions of honor.

I had never been to that church before and their worship customs were unfamiliar to me so I just tried to follow the pastor’s lead. When she stood I stood. When she sat I sat. At one point she stood to sing, so I stood. She waved her hands in the air so I waved my hands in the air. She turned around so I turned around. Not long after I was informed that it was time for me to go back and sit with my family. Here were 3 boys barely containing their laughter. As soon as I was seated they asked, “Why were you doing the Hokey Pokey in church?” Sometimes it is better not to be seen. Being in a position of honor can be a liability.

Jesus also said not to call anyone rabbi. In first century Palestine, rabbi was not an official title but an honorary title. Nor, said Jesus, are we to call anyone father. Surely Jesus was not suggesting we ignore that 5th Commandment about honoring parents. It is more like calling someone, for example, the father of modern medicine or the mother of modern educational theory. It is not so much the literal parent as an early pioneer.

It is more like the founding father or mother of a congregation is in truth just another follower of Jesus along with all the others. We all sit on the shoulders of others. So often when people want to make sure to know who their father or mother was it is so they can gain status, so they can get privilege, so they can be seen as something they are not, as though they are elevated above others when we are all sitting on the shoulders of those who went before. Titles can give an illusion of importance.

There is a story – perhaps true – about humorist Robert Benchley who was leaving an elegant tavern one evening. He had imbibed excessively. He found himself face to face with a uniformed man whom he took to be the doorman. He said, “My good man, would you get me a taxi?” The uniformed man drew himself up proudly. “See here, I happen to be a rear admiral in the United States Navy.” Benchley answered back, “Then just get me a battleship.”

It does not matter whether we are doctors or dog-walkers, CEOs or high-school students. God honors the servants. “The son of man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.” Leonard Bernstein was once asked which instrument was the most difficult to play. He thought for a moment and then replied, “The second fiddle. I can get plenty of first violinists, but to find someone who can play the second fiddle with enthusiasm — that’s a problem. And if we have no second fiddle, we have no harmony.” Then there is that wonderful country music song entitled: “Nobody Wants to Play Rhythm Guitar Behind Jesus; Everyone Wants to Be Leader of the Band.”

A few years back there was a poll on the Internet that asked this question, “Which one member of your family is the best looking?” The top rated answer in the poll was, “Me.” A majority of the respondents listed themselves as the best-looking member of their family. That corresponds with another public opinion poll that asked people which member of their family was the smartest. Once again most often was listed “Me.” But when asked which family member was most likely to tell a lie, “Me” only ranked ninth out of ten possible answers. The conclusion is that most of us think that we are better-looking, smarter, and more honest than the rest of our family.

Humility comes from the word for ground, humus. It does not need to mean treating yourself like dirt but simply being down to earth. As Bishop Fulton

J. Sheen once said, “The proud man counts his newspaper clippings; the humble man counts his blessings.” Our testimony should not be, “What a great Christian I am,” but “What a great God we have.” We can walk into a room and say, “Here I am,” or we can say, “There you are.”

I have been to a lot of church gatherings over the years and I have seen a lot of nationally prominent church leaders and denominational officials and distinguished professors who take on the characteristic of celebrities. Most never acknowledge you but somehow look right past you. But there was one person who I found different. I had flown to California to a conference for pastors and church leaders. There were thousands of people gathered in this hall. I took a seat where I always like to sit – in the very back.

I was sorting through some material that I had been given, sitting by myself talking to no one. I looked up to see that the main speaker at that conference was walking the entire length of the hall from the stage all the way to the back to where I was sitting. He put out his hand and introduced himself as though I were some sort of celebrity.

That man is Rick Warren pastor of Saddleback mega-church, author of the very popular Purpose Drive books, recently moderator of a nationally televised conversation with the presidential candidates. He called the men who would be President to meet with him and they did so, yet he treated this small town preacher like the most important person in the room filled with thousands of people. And I have had a warm spot in my heart for him ever since.

It reminds me of a saying sometimes used in 12-step meetings: The newcomer is the most important person in the room. It is not the speaker, it is not guy with the great stories or the gal everybody likes. It is not the one who is admired and whose advice is sought. It is the one struggling and seeking, the one who knows his personal failures, the one who has faced her personal demons. That is who is most important in this room. It is the most humble that God exalts.

Those who live to be seen and admired live in a prison of their own making. They cause themselves untold trouble by adding their own expectations to what God really wants. Searching after honor is a fool’s errand. Real freedom comes in humility and service in the way and spirit of Jesus.

O Lord Jesus Christ, in whom all differences of class are done away, take from us all pride, envy and prejudice. Unite us one to another by a common zeal for your cause, and enable us by your grace to offer to you the manifold fruits of our service. Amen. (Brooke Foss Westcott, 1825-1901, Bishop of Durham)