



## THAT'S ENOUGH ABOUT ME...

February 21, 2016, The Second Sunday in Lent

Luke 13: 31-34; Philippians 3:4b-7, 10-17

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Theme: True humility is to focus on others more than self.

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*O God, by your word to us in Scripture, may we hear what we need to hear, not merely what we want to hear. By your word to us in Scripture, show us how we ought to live, not just how we want to live. And now may the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer. Amen.*

Some years ago, a scholarly gentleman – now moved away – regularly attended our Thursday morning Men's Bible Study. That is, he regularly attended unless the group was studying any of the Epistles of Paul in the New Testament. If the group was reading Paul, he took a break from Thursday morning Bible study. I asked him about this over lunch one day. He confessed that he simply couldn't abide St. Paul. "*Give me Jesus; Paul you can keep.*" I listened, and offered something of a defense of the great Apostle, a defense that included a C. S. Lewis quote, something to the effect of, "*When you meet a Christian you dislike, just imagine how much more insufferable they'd be if they weren't a Christian.*"

I don't imagine that my Men's Bible Study friend would have much liked the passage from the Third Chapter of Paul's Letter to the Philippians that Kent just read. Paul, you must know, was very fond of the Philippian congregation, a church he had himself founded in distant Macedonia to the north of Greece proper. There were no big problems in this church. In fact, they'd just sent Paul a gift, as he was in prison at the time. His Letter to them is part thank-you note, part letter of encouragement. It encourages them to remain faithful to the Christian faith and not to fall into the kind of ego-centered disputations that were bedeviling some other churches.



Paul encourages the Philippians by suggesting that they would do well to imitate the way of life of three different moral exemplars. In the beginning part of Chapter Two of his letter, Paul first offers the example of Jesus Christ. This is a very famous Bible passage; it includes the “Christ hymn,” as it’s often called. It begins *“Let the same mind be in you that was in Jesus Christ...,”* Christ who *“humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death, even death on the cross.”*

Later in Chapter Two, Paul offers a second moral example, two faithful young men who had risked their lives for the faith, both of them well known to the Philippians – Timothy and one Epaphroditus.

Now in Chapter Three, portions of which we heard a moment ago, Paul actually offers *himself* as a moral and spiritual exemplar. This is the kind of Pauline rhetorical move that would have kept my Men’s Bible Study friend home and in bed on Thursday mornings. *“What an ego,”* he would have said, *“Offering himself as an example of how to do it right!”*

I would have risen to Paul’s defense. I would have asked my friend to remember a couple of things before he dismissed Paul yet again. First, egotistical as it sounds to us, what Paul was doing in this passage – namely offering himself as an example – was quite acceptable in his world. Hellenistic ethical thinking was often rooted in moral imitation; that is to say, right behavior was learned by imitating the way of life and the thinking of important teachers, philosophers or religious figures. And odd as it sounds to us today, it was not unusual for such a teacher or philosopher or a religious figure to offer himself as an example.

Secondly, I would have pointed out to my friend that Paul goes to great lengths to tell the Philippians that he’s actually far from perfect. After he reflects about his own struggle to imitate Christ in today’s passage, he adds this: *“Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached this goal.”* He’s using language borrowed from sports, by the way, the technical terminology of Greek foot races. He reminds his readers that he has not “arrived at the finish line” ethically



speaking, that he is still very much “in the race.” Continuing with this ancient track-and-field language, Paul says he’s still “*straining forward,*” and pressing “*toward the goal,*” a moral and spiritual goal which he freely admits he hasn’t reached.

This whole question Paul’s using himself as an example, albeit an imperfect one, raises an obvious question about humility. Most everybody agrees that humility is a good thing, indeed a virtue. But what exactly do we mean by humility?

The first answer that pops into most of our heads is that to be humble means to put ourselves down a notch; it suggests self-deprecation, minimizing ourselves and our abilities and achievements. But I’m not sure that’s what really humility means. It obviously wasn’t how Paul understood humility. Of course, we’re called to be realistic about ourselves, modest, not to be puffed little egoists, but here’s what I think... I think it just may be that humility is less about how we see ourselves and more about how we see others. In other words, *humility is not about putting ourselves down; it’s about lifting others up.* Remember the second half of Jesus’ Great Commandment – “*You shall love your neighbor as yourself.*” As you *love yourself.*

A minister friend of mine, Tom Are, recently shared a story that led him to rethink humility. Tom is the Senior Minister of the Village Presbyterian Church in Kansas City. That’s the church Brick’s former pastor, Herb Anderson, served as an interim minister. It’s the church where our own Len Carrell is now an associate minister. But the story Tom shared didn’t happen in Kansas City; it happened in a church he’d previously served, Riverside Presbyterian in Jacksonville, Florida. Tom’s humility story goes like this, in his own words:

*“David was a one-shingle attorney in Jacksonville. His wife Winkie was quite a football fan. David was quite the cook. When the Sunday school class met for covered-dish gatherings, Winkie was in the backyard with the guys debating the benefits of zone defense. David was in the kitchen swapping recipes for lemon meringue pie. They were both great fun.*”



*David never called attention to himself. To my knowledge he never served on a board... never joined a club... never held a leadership position... never elected to anything. He was asked to serve on the worship committee and he said, 'I am so honored, but I know others would serve with greater quality than I...' All of this is true, but none of these are the reasons I say David was humble...*

*David went to the hospital because he was experiencing shortness of breath. Within five days he had died of lung cancer. We held the service at Riverside Church. It was the largest crowd to attend any service during my ministry there. People stood outside when they couldn't get in.*

*Everyone loved David. The thing about David is that he was always glad to see you. He seemed genuinely excited when you came into the room, like he had been waiting all day for your arrival. I'd say 'David, How are you doing?' 'Better now that I've seen you. I've wanted to talk with you, do you have a minute? Tell me about everything.'"*

Tom then reflected on David and humility, saying, *"I think that's what humility looks like. For the longest time, I have considered humility to be a posture of thinking less of myself.... But that's the wrong way to think of it. Humility is not thinking little of yourself; humility results from thinking highly of others. Humility,"* Tom concludes eloquently, *"is the fruit that blossoms when we see the beautiful, the faithful, the humanness of others."*

You might put it this way: humility isn't essentially an aw-shucks self-deprecation. It's even more than modesty about your abilities and achievements. Of course, humility includes a modest and honest realism about yourself. But the truest humility is not so much about *yourself*. It's more about how you see and treat *other people*. Paul had a healthy self-regard. He was *not* into self-deprecation. Yet his humility does shine though; it appears in how he thought of *others*: his love



and regard for his churches, his love and regard for his colleagues in ministry Timothy and Epaphroditus, his love and regard for Jesus Christ.

My brother-in-law, Terri's older brother, has what anybody would name a "healthy sense of self." Indeed, he's a larger than life personality. The room turns to him when he enters; people gravitate to him. They do so in part because of the way he has of turning conversation away from himself to you. I'm not sure this comes naturally to him. He has to work at it. When you're talking to him, he'll often offer up the same well-worn line: *"That's enough about me; let's talk about what you think of me."* But he doesn't really mean that. It means he's going to try to listen, to listen to you.

I love to talk about myself. Let's face it, so do most of us like to talk about ourselves. We like the little spotlight shining on us. So, sometimes when I'm talking to somebody I challenge myself to time how much I'm talking about *me* and *my life* and *my frustrations* and *my joys*. It's a way of checking my proclivity to turn it all toward me. *"Bite your wagging tongue, Lindvall,"* I sometimes have to silently chide myself. Other times, I actually try to keep track of the number of times I use the first person pronoun "I" in a conversation. It's almost always too much.

So here I am talking about myself in a sermon – using the "I" word again I'm just like old Paul the Apostle – I haven't reached the goal either. Like him, I'm still "straining forward," I'm still "pressing on." Not there yet, still on the way, maybe one day...

*In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*