

He Teaches the Humble

by Linda Rex

October 1, 2023, Proper 21 | After Pentecost—I’ve noticed lately in the news and in social media that there is a movement towards being split into two extreme sides. There doesn’t seem to be a place where people are willing and able to see both sides and come to some understanding of where the other is coming from. This seems to include every facet of our society, including politics, education, and matters of faith.

When the apostle Paul addresses issues of disunity, he focuses on the one thing all humans have in common—the gift of salvation in Jesus Christ. Inherent within the gift is the indication that we have great need of grace—that we all are guilty of not loving God and each other in the way we were intended to originally.

In our New Testament passage for this Sunday, Philippians 2:1–13, Paul points out that our unity, our participation in the *perichoresis* or other-centered love and oneness of Father, Son, and Spirit, are best experienced when we share in the humility demonstrated by Jesus Christ. He points out the dramatic contrast between the divinity and exaltation of the Son of God and the humiliation of crucifixion and death he was willing to undergo in human flesh at the hands of his own creation. Profoundly, we are asked to ponder this spiritual reality and to ask ourselves whether we are willing to have this same humility when it comes to those around us.

So often we are like the rocks the ancient Israelites encountered in the wilderness—hard, dry, and unyielding. There is no life or refreshment for others when we are self-absorbed, self-centered and self-willed. We easily ignore the reality of the immanent presence of God by the Spirit, and stubbornly question whether or not God really cares at all about what we are going through (Exodus 17:1–7). We can even be so absorbed with doing the “right” thing, that we stop genuinely loving and caring for those closest to us. I am learning that my own spiritual vision can become so limited that I miss the mark entirely when it comes to loving God and loving others as God intends.

How glorious that God in Christ would become that rock himself, as God in human flesh, so that rock could be broken and rivers of living water begin to flow out from and through us for the benefit of those around us! Jesus, the Rock, was willing to be truly humble to the point of death, struck by our own human hands and to suffer and die, so that ultimately, we might have new life (Psalm 78:15–16). And rising into glory, exalted by the Father to sit forever at his side still bearing our human flesh, Jesus sent the Holy Spirit, giving us a genuine personal participation in his *zōe* life, a life meant to be spent in spiritual community—a oneness based in Christ’s own magnificent humility.

We participate in Jesus’ humility when we embrace and participate in his self-sacrificial service to God and others. It takes a profound sense of self-sacrifice and humble service to be willing and able to lay down your life for others as a part of your everyday life. Yesterday, I was told about an officer of the law who was shot simply because he was busy performing his service to his community, and for no other reason. I understand that there may be more complex issues involved in that circumstance—I do not want to minimize those. But I do want to say that the heart and will to lay down one’s life in a community where one may simply be shot because he or she is a police officer, takes a will and power beyond oneself and requires a great deal of humility and grace, not to mention courage.

The willingness and ability to see another person’s point of view, even if you don’t agree with it, requires a real sense of humility, of knowing one’s own need for grace and recognizing our own limitations as creatures. It is possible to stand firmly upon what we believe God’s word says, and

still humbly meet another person where they are for the purpose of bringing them into an embrace of love and grace. This is what Jesus did for us, and what he is inviting us to participate with him in doing for those around us.

If we stubbornly remain entrenched in our place of “right”, and shut the door to anyone who does not agree with us, we miss creating the space of grace where the Spirit can begin to work to bring transformation, healing and renewal in our lives. Humbly embracing the other, while following the Spirit’s lead in faithful obedience, opens the door for God to do something new in their lives and in our own. We remain open to the Spirit, allowing the new life which is ours in Christ to flow into and through us by the Spirit, and God begins to transform, heal, and renew both us and the world around us, enabling us to participate in his own unity and oneness in the Spirit.

We praise you, heavenly Father, for loving us so much that you would stoop to share life with us through your Son and Spirit, offering your very self to us in Jesus and allowing your Son to be crucified and die. What a gift you have given! Grant us the grace to humbly offer ourselves in service to you and others, allowing Christ’s life to flow freely through us by your Spirit. Amen.

“Therefore if there is any encouragement in Christ, if there is any consolation of love, if there is any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and compassion, make my joy complete by being of the same mind, maintaining the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose. Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves; do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others. Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. For this reason also, God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus ‘every knee will bow’, of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and that every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. So then, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your salvation with fear and trembling: for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure.” Philippians 2:1–13 NASB