

Grounded in Humility

April 6, 2025

Based on Matthew 6:1. Jesus warns against prideful practice.

I confess.

Over and over again through the Season of Lent, and especially this past week, I have declared to anyone who will listen just how incredibly proud I am of this congregation as we *work for justice and wholeness in ourselves and in the world*.

I am proud of the radical hospitality the weekly support group has shown one another as we navigate together the impact of recent executive orders. I am proud of the engaged compassion shown by the career coaches in the congregation who have stepped up to offer pro bono counseling to those who are losing their jobs or feel forced into retirement. I am proud of the holistic spirituality of our Sunday Seminar class as they wrestle with the emotional and intellectual case for *Life After Doom*. I am proud of our children who preach to us each week from the First Pew Communion Table, I am proud of the dedication of our staff who are settling into their jobs and making them their own and building a team that is becoming far greater than the sum of its parts. I am proud of the Session and the Deacons who are claiming their leadership as equals alongside the Pastor, in keeping with our Presbyterian tradition. I am proud of the folks who gather for Bible at the Bar each month to grapple with theological principles and biblical texts that may seem off-putting at first but have deep meaning and hope to offer if we are willing to dig a little with open hearts and open minds. I am proud of potential new members who seek a way to offer their own gifts toward cultivating inclusive spiritual community.

I confess: I am sinfully proud of SPC as this Season of Grounding in the Spirit draws to a close, and we turn our sights toward Holy Week with all of its agony and all of its hope. Which is exactly why we must pause for one more Sunday to ground everything we have done and continue to do here at SPC in a Spirit of Humility.

Beware of practicing your righteousness before others, Jesus says, *in order to be seen by them*. And then he goes on to teach his students about fasting and prayer and simplicity and almsgiving, those same spiritual practices in which we have been grounding ourselves so far through the Season of Lent. If all you care about is what others think of you, Jesus says, you will have entirely missed the point.

In a way, we could not help but ground ourselves in these spiritual practices *before others* in this Season of Lent. Sunday morning worship is, after all, a *public* event. Promoting pathways to peace in the Middle East and hosting a novelist to discuss Dietrich Bonhoeffer through the Shepherdstown Ministerial Association are, after all, *public* events. Bearing witness to God's extravagant love for the veteran and the educator and the trans community at yesterday's social justice rally was, after all, a *public* event.

To be fair, Jesus, himself, is teaching and preaching the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew's Gospel among the crowds at a very *public* event. The whole point, for him and for us, is *to be seen* and heard and even emulated, in order to make the world a better place and in order to make ourselves better people.

The caution here comes down to intent. Practicing our righteousness, Jesus tells us - or, as I described in last week's sermon, practicing *tzedekah* - is not about *looking* good. It is about *being* good, grounded in a Spirit of love for all creation.

It all comes down to humility. Which, as I shared with our children is the same thing as simply being *human*, from the *humus*, held by the one shared breath (as our poet says), to tend the earth and bring forth life. That is who we really are.

Humility is emphatically not the same thing as humiliation! Humility is not about pretending we are not good at something when we really are or hiding our light under a bushel in order to protect someone else's bruised ego. Humility does not come from confessing our awful wretchedness or focusing forever on our faults, although it is, indeed about admitting our fallibility as the *love-clumsy bags of air* our poet says we are.

Humility is, instead, knowing who we really are, and *whose* we really are, and being grateful for it. Humility is re-claiming our blessed humanness *and the blessed humanness of everyone and everything around us*, most particularly when these precious bodies and minds and spirits God has given us have been mistreated.

Humility is admitting our utter dependence on God and one another to get through this thing we call life. Humility is opening ourselves to a new direction or a new person or a new possibility as we walk the road together.

Humility is grace.

Without humility, *practicing our righteousness* - or *tzedekah* as I described in last week's sermon - devolves into sentimentality or rabid rhetoric or an agenda-driven checklist. *With* humility *practicing tzedekah* becomes holding fast to that which is good in all of us, returning no one evil for evil, cultivating courage, and resting in the peace that passes all understanding.

So how do we get this humility?

Ironically enough, at least for me, humility comes through the very practices to which we are called to bring humility. Humility becomes a self-reinforcing feedback loop through fasting, prayer, simplicity, and almsgiving which leads to even deeper humility. And on and on and on, as we practice what we say we believe, which then

leads us to believe it more deeply, which then leads us to practice it more faithfully, which one day may very well usher in the reign of God in its fullness.

This may well have been the point Jesus was trying to make all along. There is no need to practice our piety in order to impress others. There is simply practicing being fully human, with awe and gratitude and grace that flows automatically from the divine through us and out into the world. That grace has already here with us all along. Our practice simply opens our eyes and hearts and bodies to know it and perhaps express it more clearly, held by the *one great story from which our lives cannot be unwritten*.

With grace, grounded in humility, I still confess I am proud of us here at SPC. Not for what we have done before others in order to be seen. But for offering ourselves exactly as we are: being and becoming people of radical compassion, through a grace that is working overtime through all time to make the whole world well.