

“THE HUMBLE SHALL BE EXALTED,” A Sermon delivered by the Reverend Dr. Geoffrey G. Drutchas, St. Paul United Church of Christ, Taylor, Palm Sunday, April 9, 2017

On this Palm Sunday, we gather to remember Jesus’s glad entrance into Jerusalem at the start of a final, fateful week. (*Matthew 21:1-11*) Like countless Christians before us and with us, we celebrate by receiving and waving palms. It’s our way of exalting Jesus and for a few brief moments greeting him like a king. However, in this we need to be thoughtful and a little cautious. Though in offering a royal greeting to Jesus we are just doing what others have done or do, Jesus never claimed for himself any royal privileges and prerogatives. Nor did he ask for any other special honor or treatment. While he rode an ass and a colt into the City of Jerusalem on that one fine day long ago to signify his embrace of his divinely-anointed role as our messiah, he did so with great humbleness, not wanting any of us to get carried away with the pomp and circumstance.

Throughout his own earthly ministry, one of Jesus’ big struggles was to help his own apostles and disciples understand that as the son of God he needed to be the servant of all, ready to take up the lowliest of tasks. As the gospels reveal, the apostles and disciples wanted glory for Jesus and themselves. But Jesus in his preaching and teaching always reserved the glory for God.

The Apostle Paul, who was humbled by his own mystical encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus and even rendered temporarily blind, captured better than anyone else the spirit of Jesus’ message in a letter he wrote to bolster the courage and faith of the Christians gathered in the ancient city of Philippi. In that letter, Jesus encouraged the Philippians to take up the example of Christ. Specifically, the Apostle Paul counsels them:

“The attitude you should have is the one that Jesus had: He always had the nature of God but did not think that by force he should become equal with God. Instead of this, of his own free will he gave up all he had and took up the nature of a servant. He became like man and appeared in human likeness. He was humble and walked the path of obedience all the way to death—his death on the cross. For this reason God raised him to the highest place above and gave him the name that is greater than any other name.”
(*Philippians 2:5-11*)

Paul’s testimony makes clear that it because Jesus *willingly* humbled himself that he was exalted. Paul’s message is that we need to humble ourselves too. In Paul’s view, no task

is too small or unimportant for us to do if it is going to serve God's purposes and if we do it in a spirit of obedience to Jesus Christ.

Now I know that what Paul says flies in the face of the popular wisdom that prevails today. After all, we live in a greedy, grasping time when more folks than not are just out for themselves. They want this. They want that. They want their life their way and they want it now. There's not much regard for others, let alone God. Not surprisingly, watching all this, our children are gaining the impression that only selfishness succeeds. Yet, as much as we forget it, ignore it, or deny it, when we are just out for ourselves, we lose out in significant ways. Our lives become more hollow and shallow and desperate.

Admittedly, given the way things are going today, it may be for some a leap of faith to fathom the advantages of a life lived more humbly and modestly—as Jesus taught by word and example. In fact, the rewards of living in the humble way which Jesus did lend a quality to our life that is not always visible or tangible. Nevertheless, as a mighty minion of Christian disciples have testified before us, it is the unselfish life, conducted with modesty and humility, that produces the fruit of happiness, joy, and peace, which, either consciously or unconsciously, is the hope and goal of every human being on our planet.

The 14th century Christian mystic St. Francis of Assisi spoke often about the wonderful paradox at the heart of Jesus' message. The more we give up or sacrifice for Christ, with Christ, the more we receive, the more we are divinely blessed. St. Francis summed up this wisdom in a now-famous prayer, included for your benefit in our morning worship bulletin. Why not read it together in unison:

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace. Where there is hatred, let me sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light; and where there is sadness, joy.

O Divine Master: Grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console; to be understood as to understand; to be loved, as to love. For it is giving that we receive. It is in pardoning that we are pardoned. And it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.
Amen.

Yes, in the spirit of Jesus, St. Francis affirmed that when we renounce arrogance and selfishness and give and share, we gain. Indeed, every humbling sacrifice we make in

keeping with Christ's example enriches our lives beyond measure.

The doubting and skeptical need to try Christ's way in order to appreciate how magnificently it does work. One big incentive to do so is the mess that confronts us today because of egotism, arrogance, and selfishness running rampant. Our entire society is showing increasing stress at its seams because of the greed and graspingness of people who are out to take all that they can get for themselves. The happiness index in America is way down from where it once was. Only 1 in 3 Americans report satisfaction with their life. That's in sharp contrast to 8 out of 10 men and women beyond the borders of America who report that they are happy or very happy.

The land of the brave and the free has become a nation of malcontents, brimming with complaint, anger, and resentment, without the deeper insight and will to do something about it. Whether rich or poor in pocket, so many seem to be poorer in spirit.

I have said it before, but I'll say it again. The Opioid addiction epidemic across our nation masks a spiritual crisis and deficit for an awful lot of Americans who, in the guise of responding to physical pain, are actually dealing with the psychic pain and emptiness of their lives by medicating themselves—sometimes to the point of death. Unless some of us are willing to walk more humbly with God, offering others the example of our own faithful Christian witness, the threads of what keeps us a truly civilized people could snap, leaving us with a country even more brute and mean, like something out of "Hunger Games" or that old "Mad Max" film series.

You may doubt that you can make a difference. But the power of one is great. And one plus one plus one plus one, adds up to two and three and four and more. That's how turn-arounds begin. What's more we have the knowledge and the assurance that God prospers the true, the good, and the righteous. It may take time. But we just need to focus on doing our part, serving as an example of humility and unselfishness to others.

On this score, I personally cherish a legend maintained by a group of Jews who call themselves the Hasidim. Harkening back to the Biblical account of Sodom and Gomorrah and God's promise to Abraham that he will not destroy either city if a hundred just men can be found within their gates, Hasidic Jews believe that in every generation there are a hundred just men who preserve earth from God's annihilating punishment. According to

the Hasidim, no one knows who these hundred just men are. In fact, not even those who actually count among the hundred realize they are the righteous who are holding up the earth. Yet because they are just, all humankind is given another chance for another kind of life.

Without taking this Legend of the Hundred Just Men literally, we can take its wisdom to heart. Like the anonymous just men of the legend, we as Christians need to live as if the fate of the world hinges on us and our fidelity to the way of Jesus Christ. Stodgy and old-fashioned as it may seem, we should as men and women of Christ strive to be the moral and spiritual pillars of our community. We begin to fulfill this role when we, like Jesus, take on the mantle of humility and made God's priorities our priorities, rather than just feeding our own egos and selfish desires which is spiritual dead-end.

As he rode into Jerusalem to mark the beginning of a fateful week, Jesus, our savior, "did not count equality with God something to be grasped." Instead of seeking glory for himself, he willingly humbled himself in a self-sacrificial way that he might honor and glorify God. Following Jesus on the road to Jerusalem, may we similarly live our lives for the God, committed to his son's way of truth, love, and justice that makes God's glory shine. **Amen.**