

## *Humility and Living for Others*

A Sermon by *the Rev. Dr. Joseph David Stinson*,  
Glen Ridge Congregational Church, Glen Ridge, New Jersey,  
*Preached on the Fifth Sunday in Lent, (29Mar), 2009.*

The fifth in the Lenten sermon series on Love.

Text: Matthew 23:11

“The greatest among you shall be your servant. All who exalt themselves will be humbled  
and all who humble themselves will be exalted.” ~Jesus

This is the fifth in our Lenten sermons on love, my fourth. Next week Ms Reynolds will preach the culminating sermon on the Golden Rule of Jesus. Throughout the series, the reading of Tom Holladay’s book,<sup>1</sup> and our small group discussions, Ms Reynolds, the Ministry of Adult Education and I have sought to give us practical steps to becoming like the disciples of old who were known for how much they loved. We love God and one another simply because Jesus did. He is our model and the empowering force for a life of love. Throughout the series we have acknowledged that a love like his is ‘impossible’ and that we need to receive grace through prayer to love his way. The first priority, of course, is to love God. Then we talked about the difficulty of loving those closest to us, the importance of loving church, family members and those different from us. We looked at the role of communication in fostering love and the significant obstacles that judgment and the failure to forgive put in the path of love. Today we will think about Jesus’ teachings on humility as a key to becoming a more loving person.

Our reading today in Matthew points unequivocally to the importance of humility for discipleship. “All who humble themselves,” implies there is a choice we must make.<sup>2</sup> We must humble ourselves. The problem is not ambition—for God has great ambitions for us.<sup>3</sup> The problem is selfish ambition—those that demand attention, notoriety, possessions. But a demanding life does not always deliver what we were made for. We cannot demand the most important things. We cannot, for example, demand happiness. Holladay wrote, “Demanding is tricky—and even dangerous. While it sometimes gets you the little things, it can keep you from the most important things.”<sup>4</sup>

A root of our problem is our need to be noticed.<sup>5</sup> The Bible is full of examples of humanity’s need to be noticed and the trouble we get into because of it. Those who built the

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<sup>1</sup> Holladay, Tom. *The Relationship Principles of Jesus*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 255.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 259.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 260.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 263ff.

Tower of Babel reached into heaven, believing they could put humanity on a level with God so as to, ‘*to make a name for ourselves.*’<sup>6</sup> I think also of the disciples James and John who asked Jesus for permission to sit on his right and left when he came into his glory.<sup>7</sup> I think of Cain who killed his brother because he thought Abel’s offering drew greater notice from God.<sup>8</sup> It is the selfish desire to be noticed that again and again gets us in trouble. We fear if we do not look out for ourselves we will lose something. However, God always takes care of our needs—not always all we want, but what we want differs from what we need.<sup>9</sup> Humility is the Jesus-prescribed antidote to our dilemma.

When instead of looking to gratify our own need to be noticed, we notice instead the needs of others, we get on the right track.<sup>10</sup> We have to choose this way of living *intentionally*. Most often the way we are called to love is by noticing small things we can do for others when we become aware of their needs. Mother Teresa used to say, “We have an opportunity to love others as he loves us, not in big things, but in small things with great love.”<sup>11</sup> The English Baptist minister F.B. Meyer taught:

I used to think that God’s gifts were on shelves, one above the others, and the taller we grew in Christian character; the more easily we could reach them. I now find that God’s gifts are on shelves, one beneath the other; and it is not a question of growing taller but of stooping lower.<sup>12</sup>

The richest ways of living are found outside the center ring with all attention on *our* egos. Like the Good Samaritan, we do not really find our mission in life by standing above others’ needs, but rather, as Rick Warren told us, by stooping down to help the poor person by the wayside.<sup>13</sup> To live this way is loving, but the pathway to love is through humility.

Paul, in one of the most important statements on Jesus in Philippians 2, said of Jesus:

...who though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him....<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Genesis 11:4.

<sup>7</sup> Mark 10:35-45.

<sup>8</sup> Genesis 4:5-7.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 268.

<sup>10</sup> Holladay, *op cit.*, 267-268.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 269. See Spink, Kathryn, Mother Teresa: A Complete Authorized Biography (New York: HarperCollins, 1997), 169.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 275.

<sup>13</sup> Luke 10: 33-34

<sup>14</sup> Philippians 2:5b-9a.

What is important to us in this passage about Jesus' humility is a line just before it. The Apostle wrote, "*Have this [same] mind among yourselves which is yours in Christ Jesus....*" The key to Christ's power is his willingness to serve his Father and others. This is the key to his love. And we are to 'have this mind among ourselves.' Humility takes us closer to love.

Jesus is the vine and we are the branches, and if we are to bear the fruit of love we must stay close to him, or as the Gospel of John tells us, we must 'abide in him.'<sup>15</sup> Holladay notes that there is a very important connection between abiding in Christ and being able to love like him.<sup>16</sup> For Jesus told his disciples:

Just as the Father has loved me, I have also loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love.... This is my commandment, that you love one another, *just as I have loved you.*<sup>17</sup>

Abiding in Jesus is how we discover the grace to love as he does. We plug into the power of Jesus through prayer and worship, learning Scripture, by seeking his spirit and by noticing the needs of others. To live this way requires denying selfishness and replacing it with humility. Humility is not putting ourselves down—it is lifting God up. St. Peter advised, "Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time."<sup>18</sup> Humility is being honest about who we are and who God is, about God's strength and goodness and what God can do in our lives.<sup>19</sup> Pride can be a great obstacle to genuine discipleship. To love takes humility. Therefore,

Have this mind among yourselves which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God as something to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant.... And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross.<sup>20</sup>

This is the way to a loving life. Choose it. "Love is not arrogant and does not insist on its own way."<sup>21</sup> Rather it embraces humility and seeks the good of others.

Here is something to consider as we close: "Is there some seemingly small thing I can do for someone else today?"

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<sup>15</sup> See John 15 where after employing the vine-branch image, Jesus tells us ten times to 'abide in him.'

<sup>16</sup> Holladay, *op cit.*, 287.

<sup>17</sup> John 15:9-10, 12. Italics, mine.

<sup>18</sup> 1 Peter 5:6.

<sup>19</sup> Holladay, *op cit.*, 291.

<sup>20</sup> Philippians 2:5b-9a.

<sup>21</sup> 1 Corinthians 13:4-5.