

Epiphany 5
St. Paul's/Resurrección, Mount Vernon, WA

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True Humility

In a recent conversation with Jay Bowen, Skagit elder and artist, we were talking about spirit guides. He says that we call them angels, and perhaps that is so. I understand a little about how western Christianity understands angels. He is the one who sees into both worlds.

I did share with him something I learned from the Tsachi people in western Ecuador with whom I was raised. For them, each animal has a spirit, the essence of the animal, and all the animals of the same kind is ruled by a chief spirit. The spirit of the deer, for example, is ruled by the chief deer spirit. If you ever saw it, it would be as big as a cow, and though it is solid and substantial, any arrow or spear thrown at it will not reach it. I told him that the spirit of the deer may or may not be of assistance to you. It all depended on how you court it. If you treat it well, it will treat you well. If you do not—there are plenty of old stories about people who got in a lot of trouble that way. He found it really interesting. The spirit of the deer is an independent being. Its relationship with humans is on its own terms, not ours. We did not create it; we do not control it; we court it. Unsurprisingly, the Tsachi people are not an arrogant people. They avoid conflict and manage their relationships carefully. They seek to live in harmony. Life may not go so well if they do not.

Here is an approach to humility with important things to teach us. In today's lessons we see it. In the first lesson, God reminds the people that God alone is all powerful, and all-knowing. God helps the humble and opposes the arrogant.

In Paul's letter to the Corinthian church, he reminds them that he has rights to make certain demands as an apostle, but he gives those rights up. He is free in Christ, but he uses it to serve the Gospel. His focus is not on himself.

In the Gospel lesson, we read stories of Jesus healing people left and right, but before the notoriety can go to his head, he is off to other villages to do the same thing. The Kingdom is at hand, and he must preach it in word and deed. Jesus is never about himself, but about the reign of the realm of God.

All of us are important, but none of us is the Center. Each of us has our own center, validity and place, but the Center of all is God, who is everywhere.

So, what does it mean for us today?

George Monbiot wrote an article for [The Guardian](#) that presents an interesting take on the

recent political divisions in our country. He explores it from a sociological/psychological point of view in terms of intrinsic and extrinsic values. Intrinsic values are internal and self-defined. They include things like doing good, being of service, having inner peace and being OK in the world. They are also self-rewarding, in that one does not look outward for confirmation. Extrinsic values are external and defined by society. They include possessions, position, influence and power. One looks to one's community for confirmation on these.

Clearly, we all hold a mix of these, but he makes the point that mainstream culture in the U.S. puts a high value on extrinsic values. Keeping up with the Joneses, where you live, what car you drive, what work you do, what influence you have in the community, and what political party you are affiliated with, are all defining elements of dominant White culture. Consequently, those in power tend to favor extrinsic values, especially government, because they tend to reinforce the status quo, and keep them in power. He notes that our most recent ex-president is a walking, talking screaming, yelling example of extrinsic values. His base holds them too. The mainstream left tends not to.

Now, I shared this with our kids and got a very thoughtful and considered response from my eldest. He said there is a generational divide here. He calls himself an "elder millennial." He says his generation is on a campaign to derail extrinsic values in society. They value experiences, relationships, and the good one does in the world.

It may be a stealthy cultural coup, but our faith is on their side. Humility is an intrinsic value. It stands in contrast to the prince of vices, pride, which measures itself extrinsically. When we begin from a place of humility, a whole lot of things begin to fall into place.

Good sermons have 3 points, right? Here are three.

A humble person is not afraid of the world. For the offertory today the choir will sing what our African-American siblings call their national anthem. Written in 1900 by James Weldon Johnson of Florida, a national organizer for the NAACP, smack dab in the middle of Jim Crow, he writes fearlessly:

*Sing a song full of the faith that the dark past has taught us,
Sing a song full of the hope that the present has brought us;
Facing the rising sun of our new day begun,
Let us march on till victory is won.*

The humble heart takes the slings and stings, the pain and suffering of life and turns them into something good. A humble person strives for justice and peace, not to fix the world, but to turn suffering into wisdom and compassion.

A humble person recognizes that they are not the center of the world. The song

continues,

*Thou who hast by Thy might, led us into the light,
Keep us forever in the path, we pray.
Lest our feet stray from the places, our God, where we met Thee,
Lest our hearts, drunk with the wine of the world, we forget Thee;*

This is not black supremacy supplanting white supremacy. This is a profound recognition that no one group of people has the right to claim center stage. Dominant White culture in the U.S. is slowly learning to pull back the edges of its pervasive influence to give equity of voice to others. Johnson is claiming that space. Perhaps on the borders of this space, horizontal relationships can grow rather than vertical ones. I am convinced that here and only here will we truly address the race issue in our society. The humble person doesn't have to de-center themselves with others, for they have already done so.

A humble person recognizes that their social power with others is really only influence. And finally,

*Stony the road we trod, bitter the chast'ning rod,
Felt in the days when hope unborn had died;
Yet with a steady beat, have not our weary feet
Come to the place for which our fathers sighed?*

Dominant White U.S. culture, as all dominant cultures in human history, has turned a blind eye to something seen over and over again. The core of a person is ultimately free. The resistance of Blacks and Coloreds under Apartheid, the rise of Nelson Mandela after 27 years as a political prisoner (RIP), the survival of Victor Frankl in the Nazi concentration camps, and the culture wars going on today, are all testament to the fact that the only person over which we have control is ourselves, and no one else.

Influence recognizes that the input we offer to others will be taken in through their own grids, their own persons, and the results are ultimately unpredictable. Power is exercised in the context of domination. Influence is offered in the context of a relationship. Influence loves, power controls. Jesus influences but does not control. The humble person follows Jesus' path.

How, then, do we be humble? It's one of those catch 22's. The more we try the harder we fail. For example, as long as our striving for justice is inspired by a desire to fix the world, it will always be extrinsic, self-centered and control oriented. Intrinsic justice emerges when we humbly want to be a good and just people who love unselfishly, and that starts with you and me being a good and just people who love unselfishly. Just put your eyes on others, and love them for who they are, just as you love yourself for who you are, and humility will replace pride in your heart and in our communities.