**Hometown Exiles: Humility**

LaGrave Christian Reformed Church

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Reverend Peter Jonker

1 Peter 3:3, 5:5-7

For the last two weeks, our Hometown Exiles sermon series have been looking at how a hometown exile carries herself in the world. Even though Peter’s audience is living in the town where they were born, they know that they are citizens of a different country. They’re not citizens of Rome, they’re citizens of the New Jerusalem. Their Lord isn’t Caesar; their Lord is Jesus. How does their King want them to carry themselves in their exile? Two weeks ago we heard about how a hometown exile should relate to the authorities. Last week we heard that a hometown exile should respond to evil with blessing. This week we will look at another one of the qualities of a hometown exiles. This week we will hear that God calls hometown exiles to live in the world with humility.

Two passages here. Open your Bibles to 1 Peter 5:5-7, but I will start with 1 Peter 3:8, a second place where Peter holds up this virtue. Finally, all of you, be like-minded, be sympathetic, love one another, be compassionate and humble. Notice his words from chapter 5. Notice the spatial metaphors he uses when talking about Humility. In the same way, you who are younger, submit yourselves to your elders. All of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, because, (and here Peter quotes Proverbs 3:34) “God opposes the proud but shows favor to the humble.” Humble yourselves, therefore, under God’s mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time. Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.” So Peter mentions humility twice. He thinks it’s an important virtue for hometown exiles.

He’s not alone in those sentiments. Just about all the New Testament writers call for humility from God’s people. James calls for it and he quotes the same Proverb as Peter. Listen to what he says, it almost sounds like he and Peter have been sharing notes. Here’s James 4:6-7, “God opposes the proud but shows favor to the humble. Submit yourselves (again a picture of lowering yourself), then, to God” You can imagine Peter and James sitting down over coffee and saying to each other. “Humility! Yes! So important for God’s people!” Paul pushes humility too. He doesn’t quote Proverbs but in Philippians 2:3 he says, “do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others above yourselves.” Above yourselves. Again that spatial metaphor. Humility is low. And of course Paul, James and Peter echo the call of Jesus. Jesus said repeatedly “All those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.” Put it all together and the message is clear: Humility is a central quality for a person who follows Jesus. And Peter calls us to reflect on humility today.

So what does the Bible teach about this central virtue and how do we grow it in our life? Humility begins in the dirt. The Greek word for humility here is tapeinos. It’s a word that has the sense of being low to the ground. All that physical imagery of lowering yourself that I talked about before, it’s in the sense of the original Greek word. To be tapeinos is to be low to the ground. Close to the dirt. You’re not high and mighty, you’re grounded.

It is close to the same meaning in English. In English, humility has to do with dirt. Do you know what humus is? Gardeners do. When living things break down and decay, they form humus. Dead plant materiel decays and forms this rich loamy soil called humus. It’s enormously fertile stuff. Great for growing. Both humus and humility come from the same Latin word humus which means dirt. So in Greek and in English humility connects to the earth, to the soil.

Okay. Very interesting. But how does it help us be humble? Here’s an image to guide us: Humility is spiritual humus. Just as botanical humus is made up of the dead and decaying plant life transformed into rich soil, so humility is made up of our dead stuff-our weakness, our failure, our vulnerability-transformed into a life giving virtue which brings growth. Here’s how that works. Christ is the Gardener. We give him the bruised and broken junk of our life-our failure, our weakness, our vulnerability-and he works through that mess with his grace, his mercy. He works through our mess with his blood and his power and transforms it into humility. By his grace, that junk ferments into this deep rich loamy soil. It’s not broken shameful stuff anymore; now it’s a kind of richness that fertilizes all kinds of other virtues in us.

Our passage doesn’t use the garden imagery, but in its own way it calls us to bring the humus of our failure before the Gardener. “Humble yourselves therefor under his mighty hand and he will raise you up in due time.” Bring him the humus of your weakness and failure and let the Gardener work with that. Let me suggest that the Gardener would have us bring three kinds of humus to him–the weakness of our head, our heart and our hands.

First we bring the weakness of our head-our perplexities, the limits of our understanding. Let’s admit we don’t like to admit our failures in this area. We don’t like to say, “I don’t know.” We don’t like to be wrong. We don’t even like to ask for directions. We much prefer the illusion of certainty. Certainty is like a drug for us. If some smooth talking minister stands up and tells people, “I’ve figured out exactly what the Bible says about the end of the world. I’ve got Revelation figured out! I see through the glass clearly,” people will fill that preacher’s church. But in claiming to have all the Biblical answers, that preacher lacks appropriate Biblical humility. Beware of people who have all the answers, who never say ‘I don’t know.’ Preacher’s. Conspiracy theorists. Leaders.

The Bible paints an interesting picture of human knowledge. On the one hand, we are called to assured faith. We are called to deep confidence and deep reliance of the central things of God. “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe!” Says Jesus. “Do not let your hearts be troubled, trust God and trust also in me.” “Here is a trustworthy saying, worthy of full acceptance,” says Paul in 1 Timothy. We Christians know things. True things that we hold with faith. We don’t say, “I kind of believe in God the Father almighty. I mostly believe in Jesus Christ his son. And I’ve got a hunch about the Holy Spirit. No! There’s a part of our faith that is built on the certainty of faith.

But there is another side to Biblical faith. There are clear limits to what we can know. Ephesians says that God is infinitely more than we ask or imagine. You can’t have all the answers about a God who is infinitely more than we ask or imagine. We see through a glass darkly, says Paul in 1 Corinthians 13. And in Romans 11, after trying to figure out one of the most difficult puzzles of faith, Paul realizes he still hasn’t got it all figure out. He falls to his knees and he says, “Oh the depths of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments, and his paths beyond all tracing out? Who has known the mind of the Lord? Who has been his counselor?” Lord, here’s my little attempt. I can’t get my head around it! But you have it in your hands. I give you the broken scraps of my understanding. True biblical humility says, I don’t know, but God does. We give Jesus the humus of our weakness and he does great things with it.

We also bring the gardener the weakness of our heart. Prone to wander. Lord I feel it. We bring the humus of our failed righteousness. Remember the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector? The Pharisee stood tall before God with no sense of need, no humus to give the Gardner. He said, ‘Lord I think you know I’m pretty awesome.’ The tax collector fell to his knees and said: ‘Lord have mercy on me a sinner. I’m a mess Lord, I know it. Here’s my mess. Please do something with this mess.’ The tax collector is the one who goes home forgiven because, as Jesus says, “whoever humbles themselves will be exalted.” True Biblical humility says, ‘I’m not faithful, but Jesus is. Jesus, here is the wreckage of my hesitating heart. Take it and heal it and make it new.’

Humility also involves admitting the weakness of our hands, the limits of our power. When we think fixing the world is up to us, when we think that we are the ones who have to right every wrong and pay back every hurt, when we make no room for the justice of God to right the wrongs, and when we make no room for the power of God to make the crooked things straight, we are going to make a mess. We need to do what we can to fight evil in this world, but honesty and humility mean that in the end we fall to our knees and say: “Lord I don’t know how to straighten out the crooked things, and sometimes when I try I make things worse. Maranatha Jesus. Make this world new.” True biblical humility says, “Lord I can’t fix things, but you can.” We give Jesus the humus of our weakness and he does great things with it. The world is full of proud certainty and dangerous outrage. Wherever we look, people who claim they have all the answers are crashing into each other. The world desperately needs a community of humility and grace.

If you pay close attention, our passage has humility in two directions. It calls us to humble ourselves before God-that’s verse 6, but it also calls us to humble ourselves toward each other-that’s verse 5. All of you, clothe yourselves in humility towards one another. We give the humus of our weakness to God first, but we also give the humus of our weakness to each other. How do we do that? We do that when we confess our sins together before God in a worship service. We do that when we ask each other for help. We do that when we say to someone, “I’m just having a rough time right now and I need someone to listen.” We do that when we say, “I’m not good at this, but you are. Could you help me.” We do that when we say, “I really need you to pray for me.” This kind of humility is the center of real Christian community.

I may have told this story, but years ago, I went to a seminar with a top-flight scholar whose work I really admire. I was there for two weeks with a bunch of ministers. At the beginning of the week most of us were in awe of the leader and we listened to him as the great man in our midst. When we spoke up in class, I hate to say this, most of us spoke up with a desire to impress the great man. We wanted to say something learned so that our esteemed teacher would be impressed and our classmates would know that we were a smarty-pants. But then in one of the early classes, our leader had a moment of vulnerability. We were talking about the dynamics of shame and he shared his personal struggles with shame. He held up his humus before us. From then on, the class was different. Everyone was more grounded. We were more open with each other. We were less eager to impress each other and more eager to connect and work together to figure things out. We didn’t see our teacher as over us, but as one of us. He was certainly still the expert, but also just a human. His sharing of humus changed the nature of our community.

This whole humility thing is not small. It goes right to the heart of what it means to be human. Let’s go back to the original setting and let’s remember the differences between the little church and the culture in Asia Minor around them. Think about the difference between the imagery of their worship spaces which I tried to illustrate a couple of weeks ago. What kind images were in Greco Roman temples? Images of strength and perfection and power. Perfectly proportioned heroes with big muscles and alabaster skin. And what was the imagery of the churches. A crucified man dying on a cross. An image of humiliation…Did you know that the Greeks didn’t like humility? They thought humility was weak, and weakness was shameful. Aristotle thought the humble were weak flatterers. He thought that humility kept the spirit of free men from developing virtue. The Greeks hated anything that a free man should kneel or yield before another. (source: Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, volume 8, page 2 and 11) Those attitudes come from an idea of what it means to be human, what it means to be great. Never give up. Never show weakness. Never apologize. Forget about what other people are saying about you. Fight for what you want. Never bow the knee. Never give in. There are lots of people who live that creed today.

It’s not the way of Jesus. When you are a Christian, your strength doesn’t come from yourself, it comes from knowing that you are beloved of God through Jesus Christ. You know you are beloved, but you also know that you’re not yet the person God intends you to be. So every day you bring your mess to God. “Lord I am not the person you intend me to be, but I know that you love me. I know that Jesus died for me and I am your child. Help my become the person you want me to be because I can’t do it by myself.” Every morning you bring your humus to the Gardner and you say, “Lord here’s my dirt. Take it, and make something of it. It’s a mess right now but I know that you can make it bloom.” This is fundamental to how we see the world as Christians. It’s how we move through life and we don’t do it by ourselves, we do it in community, we do it together.

God opposes the proud but shows favor to the humble. This is us. Busted people. Sinners. Doubters. Bewildered but beloved, we press on towards the goal, knowing that even when we fall to our knees, the one who called us is faithful and, he will lift us up in due time.

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