

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Sermon Text: James 3:13 – 4:3

Theme: “*Perfect humility*”

Grace, peace and mercy to you from God our Father and our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ.

Humility is an unusual thing to define and a much more difficult thing to grasp hold of as a way of going about your life. Peter writes after James that all of us should cloth ourselves with humility (1 Pet 5:5). And yet whenever we see or hear of people serving with humility, there is such a fine line before humility becomes pride in one’s own ability to lead a humble life. If the person next to you said, “I served the Lord with great humility and with tears, although I was severely tested”, how would you react? Would you be tempted to tell them to put a ‘lid on it’ and stop big-noting themselves? Well this is what Paul said to the elders of the church in Ephesus (Acts 20:19).

Humility may be difficult to live out but this is the life that God’s Word calls us to as we hear James describe in our New Testament reading, “Who is wise and understanding among you? Let them show it by their good life, by deeds done in the *humility* that comes from *wisdom*.”

Heavenly Father, fill us with your Holy Spirit so we may serve your creation with your wisdom. We pray this in Jesus’ name. Amen.

Who is the greatest?

Jesus was in the midst of his preaching tour when he and his disciples came to Capernaum. At some point in time the disciples were arguing amongst themselves, not about the things Jesus had been teaching them, but about the very human issue of who was the greatest. The Bible text doesn’t specifically state that they were debating who was the greatest of them as disciples, but surely if they had been talking about others and not themselves, they might have asked Jesus for his opinion. But instead they are embarrassed and so they keep quiet.

As a reminder to us not to try and keep our problems to ourselves, God knows the things that are on our minds, so Jesus has everyone sit down and he tells them a great truth. “If anyone wants to be first, they must be the very last, and the servant of all” (Mk 9:35). This truth flies in the face of much of the conventional wisdom of the world that would have you believe, ‘in order to be first, you must put yourself first’. Care for yourself first, then you can look after others, is another way we might phrase this. But Jesus wants his leaders to put themselves *last* in order that they may be first.

Spending time serving in the Army, I got to experience first hand many leaders, both as peers and as my senior officers. The Army, or indeed the Navy or the Air Force, relies on good leaders who can make decisions that will determine to safety and well-being of their soldiers and perhaps many other people as well. Good leadership is demanded and during officer training, anyone who doesn’t make the grade is removed from training without much sentiment. From the outside, it may seem as the best leaders are those who strut their stuff and make a grand show of doing a good job. The truth is the best leaders are those who recognise their job is to *serve* those who are underneath them. By looking after and caring for their subordinates, a good leader is able to inspire, encourage and empower others so everyone works together as a team.

This has been my experience in the army, an organisation which must have good leaders, but the same applies to any area of work. Schools, hospitals, business, sporting teams, bands, homes all need good leadership. Flashy leaders who look the part and have a high profile are usually good for publicity, but unless they serve with a sense of humility, unless they lead by serving, they will rarely be concerned with the welfare of others. They will indeed risk becoming self-serving where the expectation is that others are in fact serving them. They put their ambition before their service.

The disciples argued as to who of them was the greatest. Jesus saved them from becoming too puffed up with their own importance at being chosen by him to be his disciples, to be his chosen apostles. In God’s eyes, the greatest is the one who is last, the smallest, the least in the eyes of others.

Chosen by God

Imagine if you were personally chosen by Jesus to be one of his disciples? What if he picked you out of a crowd to have dinner with, or if you were plucked from your job to follow him, to learn from him so you could be his messenger so others would come to know of his love for all people. If Jesus tapped *you* on the shoulder and said, I want you to work with me, wouldn't you feel important? Wouldn't you feel as though you had been singled out as someone special? Well of course this is exactly what Jesus has already done for you. As a baptised child of God, you have been named as one of His children, you are working alongside Jesus to bring his healing grace and peace into a world that is desperately in need of it. You have been chosen by God to serve his people.

Being chosen by God should make you feel special. He has called each one of you individually. But if you look around, you notice lots of other people also called by God. I pray that each one of these other people also feel as though they are special too, just as you are. The tragedy within churches and congregations is that we can spend too much time looking at each other, wondering who is most special. Who is doing a better job and who should we follow as we seek to be a better church or to be better Christians. We may fall easily into the same trap as Jesus' disciples did in Capernaum.

Perfect Humility – Perfect Service

While ever we are looking at ourselves and weighing up our individual performances, we are not looking at Jesus to lead us. We are judging ourselves and each other with our human eyes and human wisdom which will always look for the flashy leader to set the scene for us. Where does God's Word focus our attention? "Let them (good leaders) show it by their good life, by deeds done in humility that comes from wisdom (godly wisdom)." Look for leaders that aren't focussed on being great leaders but who quietly get on with the work at hand. If you follow them, if you follow their example, there's every chance you will be doing the very work God has given us to do in the world today. This doesn't mean we all do the same thing. If everyone followed the example of the person who quietly goes about making good scones for our church's morning tea so we enjoy good fellowship, we would have great morning tea, but not much else. Maybe you're not so good at scones, but you do like to visit others – and so you do this, which becomes a good example to someone else. And so on.

James never describes what the good deeds are that make up the wise and understanding person. What he does emphasise is the humility of service. The putting of yourself last and others first. A favourite passage of mine is when the Lord is dividing the righteous from the unrighteous in Matthew 25. The righteous ask the Lord, "When did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?" (Matt 25:37-39) Those who serve others according to God's wisdom, according to God will, never even realised what they were doing was particularly special. They just quietly got about the work that God put in front of them. They served with perfect humility. Matthew continues, "The King will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me'" (Matt 25:40). Perfect humility is serving others without regard for how you look in the eyes of other people. It is about service that doesn't look for a reward, either from the person you have served, or from other people who notice your good work.

The hard part of this humble service is that most people will never notice it. Sometimes when you continue to serve in this way, time after time, year after year, you may want someone else, just once to say, "I appreciate the great work you do – you are valued by us, thank you." We are human and we want that much needed pat on the back. Friends, you may not recognise the good work that the person sitting next to you has done, as your pastor I do not recognise the great work so many of you do within our community and within our congregation. But God does. God sees your good work and thanks you for joining in with his holy work.

To illustrate his point to his ambitious disciples, Jesus takes a child into his arms and invites his followers to receive this child. Why a child? Well what can a child give back to you? Nothing – nothing but their love in thanks for your perfect humble service.

May you serve one another and the world as though we were all God's children.

Amen.