

Forgiveness Is ... Humbling

A Sermon for Sunday Morning Worship with Communion

United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC

April 7, 2019 – 5th Sunday of Lent

Text: Mark 14:26-31; 66-72

Humility is not something we think about all that often. The notion of being humble, of being someone who does *not* want credit or seek acclaim or credit for right action, is not something we think about all that often. Humility is just not part of 21st century Western culture. Instead we tend to focus on being the best for the sake of being the best and everyone knowing it. Carly Simon's great song "You're So Vain" is a wonderful example of this all too pervasive attitude. "You're so vain, you probably think this song is about you" the refrain goes. That is vanity in a nutshell and vanity is the exact opposite of humility.

I think it could be argued that we actively avoid experiences that would be humbling, that make us feel like we maybe we aren't such hot stuff after all. This is precisely why in most monastic communities one of the key attributes and focal points of learning is humility. For example, in a Benedictine monastic house, many of the daily activities of the nuns or brothers are intentionally designed to be humbling. Everything from the drab monastic robes that make everyone look the same to the expectations that your own personal needs and desires are always secondary to the "Rule" combine to reinforce the insignificance of

the self in the grand scheme of things. You matter to God as a person, most definitely. That does not go away. But you are important in a monastic community as a part of their work of creating the grand engine of unceasing prayer that moves the world, rather than because of your individual accomplishments and successes. Of course, this is totally contrary to human nature which is why the pursuit of humility is such a difficult aspect of monastic life. And most religious will tell you they never fully achieve it, and they recognize it's not possible to do so. But it is important to always be trying, and to guard against thinking too highly of oneself. This is why most monastic houses have some version of what was called in the early Middle Ages the Chapter of Faults. A regular meeting of the entire monastic community, the chapter of faults is a time when each member of the community must confess what they believe to be their sins in front of the entire community and then receive the leader's penance for said sins. Usually done from a kneeling position, this is intended to be and in fact is quite humbling. But, for those of us for whom this is quite strange, we ask, to what end?

This is a legitimate question, especially for those of us for whom humility is not the natural state of our personality. This is not a bad thing! Not at all. Self-confidence, self-assurance, that ability to know you can handle whatever comes your way are all important characteristics to possess for life lived each day. If

you're not self-confident, self-assured, self-aware, you will quickly get steam-rolled by your boss or your co-workers, by the guy trying to talk you into expensive but unneeded repairs to your home or your car, even by some of your family members trying to get you to do something or act in a particular way. The tricky part for us comes in when we try to understand how it is that humility enters into our lives as at all. How can you be self-assured *and* humble? How can you receive and appreciate humbling experiences and still be self-confident? Dear friends, make no mistake. This is one of the great challenges of trying to live as a follower of Jesus.

This is what Peter found out in the story we heard today from the Gospel of Mark. It's a familiar one we hear during Holy Week each year, although perhaps not as often as we hear others. This story of Peter's denial of Jesus begins shortly after Jesus had celebrated that first Communion with the disciples in the upper room. They had left the room for the Mount of Olives and, as they were walking along, Jesus told them that they would all desert him very soon. They became incensed, insisting they would never deny him with Peter most vehement in his denials. "Even though I must die with you, I will not deny you!" Peter insisted. Jesus said again, before the cock crows twice this night you will deny me three times. I am sure Peter could not imagine this would happen

and he was probably very hurt Jesus would say such a thing. But, as it turned out, Jesus was right.

The story continues after Jesus' arrest in the garden and he is taken to the house of the High Priest. Peter follows him and stays outside in the courtyard, no doubt straining to hear what's happening inside. A servant girl notices him by the fire and identifies him as one of Jesus' followers which he denies. The cock crowed. She again says he is one of Jesus' followers and he denies it again. By this time the others waiting in the courtyard start looking at him, muttering. They end up confronting him about being a Galilean who must be follower of Jesus. This time Peter's denial is quite vehement. "...He began to curse, and swore an oath, 'I do not know this man you are talking about.'" At that moment, the cock crowed and Peter remembered Jesus' words and realizing what he had done, collapsed, weeping.

No doubt, it is difficult to see the humility in this action of Peter's at first glance. We see fear, of course. Peter was worried that what happened to Jesus could happen to him. We perhaps see even a little cowardice as his denials become more vehement. But our friend the biblical scholar William Barclay also encourages us to see more than fear in Peter. He observes, quite rightly, that we also see courage here because Peter does not run away after the first time he is recognized. He denies being who is, yes. But he does not run away, because he just could not bring

himself to leave Jesus. He doesn't even run away the second time he is recognized. He stays in spite of being terrified of what might happen. Barclay suggests that this is courage in the face of fear, and I agree. The humility takes root in that moment when Peter realizes what he has done – that he did exactly what Jesus told him he would do that he had so cockily dismissed. In that moment when he realized Jesus knew him better than he knew himself, he was humbled into a self-awareness that revealed in one overwhelming second that he was not who he thought he was.

Barclay also makes another thoughtful observation that, while it may not be entirely theologically or historically accurate, is worthy of our consideration. Barclay claims that the only way we could possibly know this story is if Peter himself told it to others. If that is the case, Barclay argues, then Peter would have had to have admitted what he did over and over again to the people who had loved and followed Jesus. In other words, he would have been continually humbling himself by admitting his denial of Jesus in that crucial moment over and over again. And, he would have also told them that because of that moment, he knew better than anyone what it meant to know you have been forgiven by God for even the most grievous of sins. This, dear friends, is what it means to be humbled before God. To know you are not perfect and in need of forgiveness and to know that forgiveness is yours absolutely and without question from God is

what it is to be humble before God. This undeserved forgiveness is given and received by each of us through grace. This grace, then, is not deserved or earned. It just is, from God. And if that isn't humbling, I don't know what is.

This humbling aspect of forgiveness is not just for the person requesting forgiveness, something we need also consider.

Humility comes into play for the person wronged who is asked for forgiveness when it becomes necessary to set aside the righteousness indignation at whatever the wrong was in order to grant the forgiveness requested. In other words, to forgive someone who has truly and deeply wronged you, you must set aside that desire to dwell on being right. "Yes, I forgive you but that was really a terrible thing you did. I would have every right not to forgive you, but I will because I am the bigger person," we want to respond. Ah, no. This is not forgiveness. This is not grace-filled letting go of anger and hurt. This is self-aggrandizing behavior that wants to grind the person's nose into whatever it is they did to you. Dear friends, if there is no humility on both sides of the situation in which forgiveness is needed, then the forgiveness will only be a hollow shell where hurtful feelings remaining can take root and grow. Both sides must give up something in forgiveness and that surrender is humbling. The one doing the wrong must admit the wrong, despite the pain and embarrassment of doing so. The one wronged must release the

wrong being forgiven, despite knowing the wrong is real and hurtful. Both sides of the situation in which forgiveness is requested and given must accept the humbling nature of that situation if the forgiveness is to be genuine and long-lasting. There are no short-cuts here.

That's because, dear friends, forgiveness is neither easy or immediate. Whether it is asked for or offered, forgiveness requires a surrender of self to another. Whether that other is a friend or a family member or God, forgiveness is an intimate exchange between two people. As we have reflected on together these last few weeks, forgiveness has many components. It is necessary. It is personal. It is complicated. It is a process. And, it is humbling. So, it is safe to say that forgiveness is not for the faint of heart or the weak in spirit. As Peter learned on a dark night so long ago, true forgiveness requires honesty with oneself and another just as it requires courage and strength to move beyond the sin to what lies beyond. That, dear friends, is love: The love of the person wronged and the person who committed the wrong. But also, God's unbounded, unrestricted, unfailing love for all who are brave enough, strong enough, humble enough to receive the love which transcends hurt and sin. Forgiveness has many nuances, as we have learned. But all of them lead back to love. May God help us hold on to that reality, come what may. Amen.