



SUNDAY SERMON

Cultivate the Interior Garden of Humility

I finally figured out how to do a single leg dead lift! It may not be a thing of beauty and grace, but for years I could not do it at all. Not because I didn't have the muscles, but because I knew I was going to topple over one way or the other and so I tensed up. The more tense I became, the more unstable.

The more unstable life becomes, the more insistent we become in demanding stability. We are not able to control many important, even essential, aspects of our lives. Right now...

- We don't know when we will be able to get together with people we love.
- We have no reassurance that those who are vulnerable will receive the care they need.
- We don't know if our children will return to school, or if their education, emotional development and well-being is in greater jeopardy by going to school or by staying home.
- Some of us are increasingly unsure of how we're going to make ends meet.
- Heck, we're not sure how safe or vulnerable we are in our most basic daily interactions.

Of course, we feel uneasy and anxious. And the more things fall apart, the greater our desire for clarity and safety, and the greater our determination to take hold and take charge of what we can.

In the midst of this, I offer a word of caution: that in our own need for security, we do not become overly strident about our own choices or judgmental of the choices made by others.

Perhaps it is consistent with some law of equilibrium or it is part of the nature of anxiety that as the number of unknown variables in our lives increase, there is a correlating increase in how adamant we are about being right.

Yes, we should all follow recommended safety protocols. Yes, the behavior of one affects the safety of all. Yes, we each need to act with the other in mind for the good of the whole. But, be careful about being right. More important, be careful to not be so sure that others are wrong, or bad.

Jesus offers us a parable. About wheat and weeds growing together in the same field. In most cases, Jesus' parables leave us with at least as many questions as answers. But in this parable, and Jesus' explanation thereof, he is uncommonly concrete, direct, black and white: the wheat is planted by God and it is good, the weeds are planted by the evil one and they are bad. Try as we might to grow that which is good, the bad grows with it.

continued

DATE
Pentecost 7
Sunday, July 19, 2020

PREACHER
The Rev. Ledlie Laughlin

But. The catch is, you cannot pluck the one without harming the other, so leave it all well enough alone. God will sort it out in the end – and “the righteous will shine.”

Says colleague Rick Morley, “the wheat and the weeds are so incredibly close together, that one cannot be uprooted, without uprooting the other. I know this. Not because I have lots of evil neighbors. But, because the goodness in me, and the evil in me, is so close together. The person who I judge to have evil intent, also has good in them. This parable is about how gray the world is. How what’s good, and what’s bad is not so easily separated.”

What, then, are we to do? In place of exerting our energy in the determination of wrong and right, weeds and wheat, I propose we tend – as in gardening...; we tend to our practice of humility. As a nation, and around the globe, this pandemic is bringing us to our knees – medically, economically, personally. Well, we’re human beings, for God’s sake. The word human, like the word humility, comes from humus, or earth. So let’s get down on our knees. Let’s put our faces right up close to the soil and dust that we shall one day become. And let’s look at the world and look at one another from this perspective – from the vantage of humility, from a place of smallness, dependence, and acceptance.

In the opening collect for our worship today we prayed, “Almighty God, the fountain of all wisdom, you know our necessities before we ask and our ignorance in asking: Have compassion on our weakness, and mercifully give us those things which for our unworthiness we dare not, and for our blindness we cannot ask; through the worthiness of your Son Jesus Christ our Lord.” God, as a parent raising young children, you know what we need, what is good for us, better than we ourselves.

Dear ones, we don’t have the answers right now. We don’t know the best ways to do many things. That makes us uncomfortable. It also makes us human. I have certainly run into plenty of times when I don’t know the best next step, when I have felt disoriented and not had as firm a footing as I would like. At such times, my ego steps in and says, “Ledlie, you can sort this out; in fact, you have to sort it out; step up, choose, take hold, act.” At those same times, my heart and soul invite me (they do not direct me), invite me to wonder, in this time of uncertainty and disease, what is it to experience my frailty or smallness? my dependence on others? my dependence on you? my reliance upon God?

Instead of clinging – my muscles and mind tighter and tighter, let me breathe through it; let me accept and trust that God is God and I am not. Says the apostle Paul, “the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words.” (Romans 8:26) Through the millennia, the mystics who cultivate the interior garden of humility have come to accept that many are the times we don’t know what to pray for, or how. Thus, a marvelous Greek Orthodox prayer concludes, “Direct my will, O God; teach me to pray, pray You Yourself in me. Amen.”

During this coming week, I invite you to seek out examples of humility in the world around you - people you know or have known or those you have read about. I invite you to pay attention to how you practice humility. Look for examples of people who choose to put God first in their lives out of true humility and gratitude.

Farmer, poet, and sage Wendell Berry is one in a long lineage of those who live at the intersection of humility and gardening, or humility and farming. He has written, “Our life

inescapably affects other lives, which inescapably affect our life." We are entangled and bound up together, not as in a net in which we are trapped, but in a network through which we are nourished and find our health. It is humility that teaches us the good of this entanglement."

Berry offers counsel in a prayer poem, "The Peace of Wild Things" –

When despair for the world grows in me
and I wake in the night at the least sound
in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be,
I go and lie down where the wood drake
rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.
I come into the peace of wild things
who do not tax their lives with forethought
of grief. I come into the presence of still water.
And I feel above me the day-blind stars
waiting with their light. For a time
I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.