

WORLD-CONQUERING HUMILITY

**Sermon Preached by the Rev. Dr. Lindley G. DeGarmo
Union Church of Pocantico Hills
September 27, 2020**

Psalm 25:1-9

Philippians 2:1-11

In criticizing contemporary literature, the great poet T. S. Eliot claimed that characters today no longer have great ideals that either inspire or conflict them. Now, he said, characters only have nervous reactions. We can all relate to that.

In this never-ending pandemic year, it sometimes feels like our world is coming apart at the seams. This past week, we passed 200,000 coronavirus deaths and they're saying we could be close to 400,000 by year-end. Racial tensions have flared. The presidential race gets uglier and uglier. Meanwhile, millions are out of work and widening income equality suggests the very economic system is broken for a large portion of our population. We kiss our loved ones goodbye in the morning and try to push back the horrible thoughts that something could happen to them by the end of the day. Yes, we know about living with nervous reactions.

We may have great ideals about things like truth, justice, and equal opportunities. But when you are anxious, it is hard to live by your convictions and so tempting to live with nervous reactions to the threat de jour. It is the nervous reactions that keep us awake in the middle of the night, make us check a second time to make sure the doors are locked, and can prevent us from enjoying the blessings of the day. It wouldn't be hard to spend an entire day doing nothing but reacting out of anxiety.

In our text today, the Apostle Paul gives us the greatest ideal of all for vanquishing our anxiety. This great ideal is to live with all of the humility of Jesus Christ. "If there is any encouragement in Christ," he begins, and then he continues by encouraging us to be humble. How does this help us rise above nervous reactions? Through the encouraging, humbling news that we belong to Christ.

Humility is not our favorite virtue. When proud parents show me their new baby, they never say, "Yeah, he's a good-looking boy, and someday we hope he's going to grow up to be humble." The reason we are not crazy about humility is that we confuse it with poor self-esteem. But true humility can only be demonstrated by people with the best self-esteem.

The self never finds esteem from achievements or great reputations or the size of a 401(k)-retirement plan—none of which is ever good enough. Esteem comes only from love. And the most important love every soul yearns to find is from its Creator. Paul is telling us today that God loves you so much that in Jesus Christ, God left the splendors of heaven, humbled himself to become human, and entered all the worst things that could happen to any of us. Then he rose from death and every loss of life, to raise us with him to a new life we can never lose.

Verses 5-11 of this second chapter are among the most powerful words of the entire Bible. Many translations set these verses set off as if they were poetry. That's because many scholars believe these verses were an early church hymn that was sung over and over because they contain the essence of our Christology. The hymn begins with telling us that Christ Jesus is in the form of God. As the gospel writer John says, the Son was with God from the beginning. But from that place of loving identity, he chose to humble himself and take the form of a servant. Thus, Almighty God, our Creator, was revealed as a servant. Amazing!

Carl Jung was fond of telling the story of the Rabbi who was asked one day, "Why did God show himself to people so often in ancient times, but today, no one ever sees God?" The Rabbi responded, "Because now, no one can bow low enough to see God." This is exactly how Rabbi Jesus reveals God to us—as a lowly, humble servant. In Christ, God stooped lower than we will ever go, taking on the very worst things that could happen to humanity. This means we have no anxiety about anything that Christ has not already experienced.

In Jesus Christ, God not only enters our fears to take on humanity, but he also gives us his life. He identifies with us, that we may identify with him. In the words of the Fifth Century theologian Cyril of Alexandria: "The son of God became like us, that we may become like him."

Think about it. This is the essence of the ministry of the Holy Spirit—drawing Christ to us, and us to Christ. Drawing Christ to us we call the Incarnation. Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit. In his baptism, where he identified with us, the Spirit descended. Then the Spirit drew Christ to the wilderness where he was tempted, like we are. Then, Jesus said the Spirit has anointed me to preach good news. Day after day, the Spirit was pushing the Incarnation deeper and deeper. And so is the Spirit drawing us into Christ, which we call sanctification, making us more and more like Christ by adopting us into the Son's relationship with the Father. Now we too can hear, "This is my beloved with whom I am so pleased."

This is the true basis of our humility. It has nothing to do with thinking that you are not good enough, or about what you have done and left undone. It has everything to do with the discovery that a Savior has found you lost in a world of anxiety, and the Spirit has adopted you into the Son's beloved relationship with the Father. You were once outside, but the Triune God has brought you home and given you a place at the table. If you pay attention to this extraordinary grace, you can only be humbled.

I know how hard this notion of grace is to truly appreciate. We are all working so hard and want to get an A on this exam called life. But it is all just pass/fail. And that drives us crazy. But we adopted children aren't supposed to struggle for an A on being loved. We just receive it as grace. Then, we can begin to take on the characteristics of our family identity. We don't make changes in life in order to receive grace; we make changes only because the grace was so freely given. And the greatest change is that we begin to look like our joint heir, Jesus Christ.

Having received the esteem of the Father's love, by grace, you can now identify with Jesus' ministry of humbling yourself to others. But don't dare try to rush to the humility until you first receive the gracious love, or the humility will become law. It can

only flow out of love. You are cherished! So cherished that God left heaven to find you and bring you home. This is at the core of our truth. We don't have a hard time believing the awful things about ourselves; most of us are pretty clear about that already. The more frightening truth is that we are cherished because that will change us.

The monastics had a prayer that they often used: "Lord show me the truth about myself, no matter how beautiful it is." Until you come to see your beauty, in Christ, you will never be able to serve, in Christ. You'll just be destined to nervous reactions in fear that the world can take away the beauty of your life.

In Ovid's famous poem about Narcissus, we are introduced to a young man who is so beautiful that all of the nymphs love him. This is especially true of Echo, who can only repeat the last words she hears. But early in the poem, Narcissus is incapable of loving anyone. When he sees Echo, he says, "I will die before I give you power over me." Tragically she echoes back, "I give you power over me." Then as one who has given power to the wrong lover, Echo disappears into a cave. Then Narcissus sees his own reflection in a pool of water and falls in love for the first time. The important thing to remember in interpreting this poem is that he doesn't know it is his own image. He keeps reaching into the pool, only to lose the new image as he disturbs the water.

The redemptive message in this tragic poem is that until we find a new image of ourselves, we will never be able to love another. Either we will keep spurning love like Narcissus, or like Echo, we will give too much power to others, until we disappear as persons. When Narcissus stands up and realizes that the person he loves is himself, he says, "What I long for I have." Now he faces a great choice. Having discovered the beauty of his life, he can return to the world free to authentically love and give himself away to others. But he doesn't choose that. Instead, he returns to the pool and lies down next to the water and becomes so consumed by his own image that he withers away and eventually descends into the underworld.

The difference between narcissism and humility is what you do when you discover this beautiful truth that what you long for you already have. Are you going to turn to the world as one free to love? Or are you going to turn back, obsessing with your own reflection and with nervous reactions?

In Jesus Christ, you are given a new image of yourself. Look at him, and you will see what the Holy Spirit is creating of you. Reach for him, and you will find God's beautiful new creation in your life. But you can't stop there. Jesus won't let you. Remember, the reason he became like you was so you would become like him—humble, giving yourself to those who are dying for the Father's love. And now, as the beloved creation of God, you can give a life that is worth giving away.

Do you see? In Christ, you are loved. In Christ, you have the capacity to love even the world that makes you nervous. That's because in Christ, you have a perfect love that casts out all fear.

To the Lord our God, Alpha and Omega, be all glory and honor forever. Amen.