

Humility: We Know It When We See It

Philippians 2:5-11

In 1860, Abraham Lincoln won the Illinois Republican Presidential nomination in this way: Lincoln's friend, Richard Oglesby of Decatur, learned that, when he was young, Lincoln had split rails near Decatur with a fellow named John Hanks. Hanks still lived near Decatur; so, Oglesby found Hanks and asked if any of those rails still existed. Hanks remembered a farm ten miles out of town where they'd split locust and black walnut for a rail fence. Oglesby and Hanks drove a buggy to the farm and discovered the fence still in use. They lifted a couple rails off the fence, tied them onto their buggy, and took them to Decatur to store in Oglesby's barn.

At the state convention the next week, Oglesby waited for the right time, then announced that he'd like to introduce a former Democrat who had something to add to the proceedings. Old John Hanks stepped onto the stage carting the rails he'd split with Lincoln three decades before. He had a huge sign attached to the rails: "Abraham Lincoln, the rail-splitter, Candidate for President in 1860."

The event swept the convention into pandemonium. The opposing forces melted away. Illinois Republicans committed themselves to Lincoln. John Hanks became a regular on the political circuit, and Lincoln's political slogan became: "Abe Lincoln, the rail-splitter."

As much as we're interested in the flashy and expensive, we're also fascinated by the humble and the common. If you don't believe it, go to any county museum, and see all the mementoes of common life lying in state. Despite the flurry given to glamour and wealth, the attraction of Abraham Lincoln, a common man, is still with us today. To know that someone is common, like one of us, yet not mediocre, a person we can identify with, and yet still view with respect, awe, or love — that grips us.

In this world where sham is bought and sold, and where, if we're honest, we're not always what we present ourselves to be, genuinely humble people can get our attention. When we see sincerely humble people, we're drawn to them. We trust them because they're not trying to get something from us. They won't try to tear us down to build themselves up. They don't need our admiration to add to their self-awareness or our money to contribute to their self-esteem.

Jesus called himself mild, gentle, unassuming, considerate, in control of himself. The old English word was "meek," but in modern English "meek" doesn't at all communicate the great strength of Jesus that was expressed in his humility. Jesus had nothing to prove for his own sake. As modern counselors say, "His personal issues were settled." He didn't seek the footlights or the limelight for his own sake. He did everything for God and others. What an unexplainable person. He went around saying that God was bringing about heaven's government on earth through him — which sounds like arrogance or mental illness — yet he spent the rest of his time genuinely and sacrificially caring for others. See why people flocked to him?

Obviously, there's a false humility. I think it was the philosopher, Kierkegaard, who said, "Most learned discussions of humility, aren't." There's false meekness as people try to twist our emotions to earn undeserved pity. "That's all right. You just run along and have a good time. I'll be fine just sitting here alone in the dark." Jesus didn't manipulate people. He didn't wheedle us until we felt guilty enough to give in to him. He was the kind of person others naturally trusted. Think about those dozen pre-approved charge card applications you got last week. If you read the letters with them, they're glowing in their stated admiration of you. Here, in gratitude for the wonderful person you are, is a charge card, APR 21%. Jesus had others' best interests at heart, and they knew it, even if they didn't always understand him. He was genuinely, authentically among us as one who loves.

The nineteenth-century Russian author, Leo Tolstoy, lived at the time when the institution of serfdom was ending. All his life he was haunted by the plight of the serfs and spent much of his time, energy, and money trying to help the newly emancipated serfs. In one of his earlier attempts to help the peasants on his ancestral estate, he lived, ate, and worked with them for a while. But he was dumbfounded when one of them told him

that they didn't take him seriously. They considered his behavior to be a performance, a rich person's dalliance. They knew he could go home anytime and enjoy his father's mansion, sleep on a soft mattress, and eat sumptuous meals. They didn't consider him to be really one of them. He just acted as though he were.

Today, Jesus rides into Jerusalem on a donkey. He arrives deliberately in a humble way. For us, however, it's hard to figure out why Jesus would arrange a parade in which he's the only entry. Is this a mere public relations stunt? Is he pretending, just trifling with the serfs? Through the centuries a lot of people — those who hold a lower opinion of human existence than God does — have been horrified at the Christian belief of God's becoming one of us. They reason that if God were to enter human life, God would somehow be diminished, made something less than divine. However, the scriptures clearly say: Jesus didn't disguise himself as a servant. He became a servant. It wasn't an act. It was real. Jesus felt what we feel, thought our thoughts, endured our pain, was tempted with our temptations but didn't sin. This doesn't diminish God. It shows us how truly great God is, by showing us how concerned God is for us.

Have you seen the photograph of Mohandas Gandhi's worldly possessions? In the photo are a couple pairs of shoes, dinner bowls, wooden fork and spoon, glasses, diary, prayer book, and a few other items. It was the same with Jesus. Jesus had nothing. He'd given it all up. He gave up everything to serve, a pattern of life that affected Gandhi. Jesus poured out his life for us, and Jesus' method is God's method. Jesus constrains our hearts by loving and serving us.

Some people can be compared to an old western storefront with its huge facade with an ordinary, or less than ordinary, small building hidden behind it. Jesus was the opposite — an ordinary human, backed by all the power of the universe, but he freely gave up his power. The poured-out life of Christ wasn't a temporary masquerade like Tolstoy's rubbing shoulders with his serfs. Christ didn't sneak out of genuine human suffering. Yes, he said he could call twelve divisions of angels to his rescue. He could have, but he didn't. As also he could sin, because he loved, but because he loved so much, he didn't sin.

Abraham Lincoln held together the union and freed the slaves. Christ, humbling himself to death, held humanity together with God and freed us from our sins. If we're intrigued by the common Lincoln and his rails, we're awed by Jesus who was spiked to a rail for our sin. He died as a slave; yet as our text says, God has super-exalted him, proving that selfless love governs the universe. The slave who was always concerned about our well-being is now Lord.

After Jesus' resurrection we see what was truly behind his life. We see that the way he lived not only demonstrates God's nature, but it shows us how God created us to live. Now we understand why Paul would tell his friends in Philippi: "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus."

May the humble ways of our Christ rule our lives and let us honor Christ by all that we do and how we do it. Amen.