

Sermon Series: Disordered Love

Sermon Title: Pride

**Matthew 21:1-11, Luke 14:11
and Matthew 10:38-39**

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Well, here we are, at the end of our series on *Disordered Love*. When we began, I said, as love becomes disordered we lose the ability to see the world as God sees it and our capacity to love God fully and to love others well diminishes and we become more and more turned in upon ourselves. When this happens life become smaller, and we experience less and less of the abundant life God longs for us to live.

Created in the image and likeness of God, we have been given the capacity to know and love God and to love like God. But, we are also prone to forget who we are, to chase after whatever we believe will bring rest to our hearts and we sometimes love the wrong things or even the right things with the wrong emphasis. So, hopefully our Lenten journey has been a time of prayer, and reflection, and renewal in which we have become more aware of our own unique struggles to love well and the opportunity God is offering each of us to be renewed and made whole.

Today we end with pride. But actually, that's where disordered love begins. Pride is the sin of our first parents. "The woman said to the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; but God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die.'" But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not die; for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." (Genesis 3:2-5) "You will be like God." C.S. Lewis refers to pride as a "spiritual cancer" which devours the possibility of love, or contentment, or even common sense. Pride is the "...preoccupation with self, the inordinate assertion of self."¹

Roberta Bondi suggests that pride involves "...liking praise or recognition, or needing to be liked so much that our actions are determined by that need....With pride the admiration of others and the elevation of self, become the goal of life rather than the love of God and neighbor."² Pride leads us to long for praise and prestige and we can become annoyed and even depressed when we do not get the attention or recognition we think we deserve. We need only look around at our social media driven, celebrity obsessed culture to know that pride is sadly alive and well. "Samuel Johnson, who composed the first English dictionary, once spoke of fame as the vain desire to fill the minds of others with yourself. This desire, of course, is hopeless, because however large a place you occupy in the minds of others, it is tiny compared to the place they themselves occupy there."(Allen, p. 76)

¹ Maxie Dunham, *Seven Deadly Sins*. p. 33.

² Roberta Bondi, *To Love as God Loves*. p. 75.

As the fourth century theologian Evagrius notes, “Pride is the inverse of humility. It manifests itself as a devaluing of others as we compare ourselves to those around us. Pride is often related to envy and pride leads us to find value in nothing; not even in God. Only those things or people who directly benefit us and elevate our status are perceived to be of value or worth. With pride, all of life becomes transactional. What can you do for me? The early Church writers were quite astute noting that pride taints everything it touches. It is the absolute enemy of love, because with your mind filled with thoughts of yourself there is little room for God or anyone else.”³

Today is of course Palm Sunday and the beginning of Holy Week. All week long we will journey with Jesus on his way to the cross. In today’s gospel reading we run headlong into pride. Imagine for a moment the contrast.

Jerusalem is the center of power for that region of the Roman Empire – both political and religious power. The city abounds with images and symbols of human arrogance, vainglory, and pride. This is the empire with all its trappings, built with the threat and use of fear and force. Sure, there is the Temple and people are allowed to be religious but only if that contributes to the peace, to Caesar’s plans. There is no humility here, certainly not with Herod or Pilate who consider themselves if not gods then godlike. And not with the religious leaders who believe their religious authority is divinely ordained and thus beyond question.

Until this point, Jesus has for the most part remained in the quiet little district of Galilee, spending his time there among common, ordinary people preaching, teaching, healing, and announcing the coming Kingdom of God. But now, he enters the center of religious and political power. It is hard to imagine a more stark contrast than the image of Jesus humbly entering the city and the show of power, and wealth, and force that often accompanied the religious and political leaders. Mike Slaughter writes, “On the Sunday morning preceding the Passover celebrations, Jesus enters the Holy City from the east. The Roman contingent, headed by the Roman prefect Pontius Pilate, paraded into the city with quite a display of military power from the west. The Romans reinforced their occupation forces on Jewish high holy days to discourage any attempted insurrection...Pilate wanted to be close enough to the Temple complex to ensure the *Pax Romana*, Rome’s version of peace.”⁴ Jesus, however, comes to the capital and enters Jerusalem riding on a borrowed donkey.

He comes, not with a conquering army, not in princely robes, not in a war chariot, or on horseback. He comes with no shield, no weapons of war, no show of wealth or position, and with no great entourage to announce his arrival. Jesus enters the city in humility, accompanied by his disciples and perhaps a few more followers, with the crowds of people greeting him by spreading

³ Bondi.

⁴ Mike Slaughter, *Renegade Gospel*. p. 112.

their coats on the road and waving the palm branches they could gather from nearby trees. Compared to Rome, this was a farcical parade. We want strength, power, and displays of success. With all that Rome can promise, who would follow this guy?

You know, in our self-obsessed culture, we would do well to reflect, often, upon the way in which Jesus humbly embodies God's love for us. Just imagine, "with the emotional tsunami of betrayal by those closest to him about to overwhelm him, as well as the certainty of execution for heresy charges made by the religious leaders and backed by the state, Jesus chose the servant role. What an upside-down, countercultural demonstration of leadership and power contrasted against the religious and political leaders of his time and ours! In choosing to be a servant, Jesus confirmed that our life's mission lies between two points: knowing from whom we have come and to whom we will return."⁵

In the gospel readings we assigned for today, in Luke and Matthew, we find Jesus saying things like, "All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."(Luke 14:11) And, "whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it."(Matthew 10:38-39) And, "I came not to be served but to serve and to give my life as a ransom for many."(Matthew 20:28) As Bonhoeffer notes, "Jesus could have been Lord of this world, leading Israel to fame and honor....But he knew, it would have come at the cost of obedience to God's will."⁶

This is the one we follow. This is the way we are called to go. It seems to the world to be foolishness, but by grace we know that servant love is the very wisdom of God. The way of humility, of remembering that we have come from God and shall one day return to God, remembering that we are made from the dust of the earth and to dust we shall one day return, is the way of Jesus who even though he was equal with God, emptied himself and humbly bore the weight of our sin and shame on the cross. And in so doing, Jesus shows us what it looks like when we are emptied of pride and love well.

Now notice, I didn't say this is the easy way, or the most profitable way, or the most popular way. But it is the way to the peace for which our hearts long. The only remedy for our pride, for thinking more highly of ourselves than we ought, is the practice of humility found in the way of the cross. Because, the cross, Bonhoeffer says, shatters all pride.

Now to be clear, humility is not about self-rejection or self-abasement. Our inherent sense of self-worth and that we are of value and matter is God-given. We are made in God's image and

⁵ Ibid. pp. 101-102.

⁶ Ibid. p.102.

God loves us. God longs for us to be whole and holy people, to lead fulfilling, meaningful lives. God longs for us to aspire to greatness, to indeed the heights of heaven. The question is, do we believe and trust that the way of the cross, the way of Jesus, the way of downward mobility is the way to abundant life? So, thinking about how Jesus entered the holy city of Jerusalem as a model for our lives, we might ask, “Do we truly believe and trust that our fulfillment, our abundant life, is to be found in following in the way of the empire, or, is it found in loving-well which means following in the way of Jesus, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who rode into town on the dirty back of a servant’s animal?” Who embodies the fullness of humanity more, Herod, Pilate, the chief Priests, or Jesus?

Now, intellectually this is an easy one to answer, but knowing the answer and living the answer are sometimes miles apart. As they say the longest journey we sometimes must make is the journey from head to heart. We know that the way of Jesus, the way of humility, the way of the cross is the way to loving well and to the fullness of life that God intends. But, following the way of Jesus can be oh so hard.

Jeremy Taylor has written, “Humility begins as a gift from God, and it is increased as a habit we develop. That is, humility is increased by exercising it.” “The opposite of pride is humility. Humility doesn’t mean that we lie about our talents and achievements, but that we realize that all of us are equally creatures, and that nothing we have and nothing we do can ever elevate us above that status.” Only in as much as we come to terms with that most basic truth will we find our identity in listening to God and receiving from God the power to be truly great by denying ourselves, taking up the cross of Christ, and loving others as Jesus has loved us.

To be humble is to understand who we are – creatures formed from the dust of the earth by a loving Creator. And it is also to understand who our neighbors are – regardless of their age, their gender, their race, their religion, their nationality, what they can or can’t do for us – they too are creatures formed from the dust of the same earth by the same loving Creator. Maybe that is why Jesus could look upon those who were putting him to death and ask that God forgive them – because his vision was not distorted by pride. He didn’t see himself as greater than they. He understood who he was and who they were – children of the same Father.

Pride distorts our vision to the point where when we look upon others we see something less than ourselves. We don’t see a person lovingly created in God’s image but a thing, an object, which is less worthy of God’s love and grace. When love becomes disordered we value or devalue others by what we think they can do for us or what they might want to take from us. Pride then leads to hatred, to prejudice, to the objectification and mistreatment of others, to the fear of anyone who is different, to sadness, and anger, and to bitterness and even to violence because we haven’t gotten the attention or recognition we think we deserve. Pride says, someone else is occupying our position in life and we need to right that wrong.

It was 1997 and Kim and I had joined a large crowd of folks in the old Charlotte Coliseum to see and hear Mother Teresa, now St. Teresa of Calcutta. I remember her being so tiny, so small. And yet, she was the largest person in the room. In her humility, she towered above us all. She had walked the road of the cross so long, that being in her presence was like being with Jesus.

That is the life we're called to. That is the key to the liberation and the redemption of the world. We can love well. By the grace of God, we can "Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, and in humility regard others as better than ourselves." (Philippians 2:3) We can walk in that better way, the road Jesus walked. It is the way of the cross. It is the road that leads to the crucifixion and death of our prideful self, *and* by the power of the Holy Spirit to our resurrection, to abundant and eternal life. "To live is to give up and give away parts of ourselves, and to live fully is to give ourselves completely away."⁷ On the Sunday before Passover, Jesus, the embodiment of what it looks like when we love well, entered the city, humbly riding on the back of a donkey. And he set his face not toward the palace, or the Temple, but toward the cross. Amen.

⁷ Ephraim Radner, *A Brutal Unity*.