



Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

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“To Walk Humbly”

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Centering Thoughts

*‘With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high?’
‘He has shown you what is good. And what does the Lord require of you but
to act justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God.’ Micah 6:8*

*The whole purpose of religion is to facilitate love and compassion, patience,
tolerance, humility, forgiveness. Dalai Lama*

*Humility is the only lens through which great things can be seen – and once
we have seen them, humility is the only posture possible. Parker Palmer*

Sermon

Listen closely. I want to tell you a little secret I’ve been keeping. I am the most humble person I know. It’s true. Just ask me.

The other day I told my husband how lucky he is to have me. And you’re lucky to have me as your minister. I know this because last week I went out of my way to give rides to two different people without cars who needed rides. Of course I don’t tell you this so that you’ll think more highly of me, I know you already do. No, I am perfectly content to stay in the background while others take credit for the things I actually have done. Aren’t I generous? Aren’t I?

My sense of humor exceeds all others. I find myself laughing at you all the time! Yes, perfection is hard to improve upon, even though others try to tell me how. In my humble opinion, they’re never right. I even think of others just about as much as I think of myself. I know much is expected from those like me who are given much. It’s a tough job being your ever-humble minister. Aren’t I humble? I don’t mean to brag, but I could really teach you something about humility.

In case you didn’t know that was a joke, here is another that takes place in a Jewish synagogue. It just as easily could be set here or in a cathedral. First, you must know that the Ark in a synagogue is the special cabinet that holds the Torah and symbolizes the holy presence of God. Here’s the joke—

Walking into the empty sanctuary of his synagogue, a rabbi was suddenly possessed by a wave of mystical rapture, and threw himself onto the ground before the Ark proclaiming, “Lord, I am Nothing!”

Seeing the rabbi in such a state, the cantor [or song leader], felt profoundly moved by similar emotions. He too, threw himself down in front of the Ark, proclaiming, “Lord, I am Nothing!”

Then, way in the back of the synagogue, the janitor threw himself to the ground, and he too shouted, “Lord, I am Nothing.”

Whereupon, the rabbi turned to the cantor and whispered, “Look who thinks he's Nothing!” <http://www.realnothings.com/famous%20jokes/nothingjoke.htm>

Writer Helen Neilsen once said, “Humility is like underwear, essential, but indecent if it shows.” (*Humility: The Quiet Virtue*, by Everett L. Worthington, Jr., page 10.) Could you see the rabbi’s underwear? Hopefully, you don’t see mine.

In the rabbi’s story, he expressed that the janitor wasn’t nearly as ‘nothing’ as he or the cantor were, thus indicating a pride clothed in penitence. Holier-than-thou ministers are no different. I playfully proclaimed my humility to you, but clearly that rang false, right? If it didn’t, again, tell me. Of course, I’ll display another sign of my great humility by acknowledging my limitations and accepting your criticism gracefully, even when it is grossly undeserved.

I may be exhibiting a certain amount of hubris or conceit by standing before you to preach about humility. It’s almost an oxymoron to demand your attention and preach humility.

One of the many pitfalls of preaching is an assumption that what I or any other preacher has to say is worth listening to. When I contemplated becoming a parish minister with preaching responsibilities, I worried I would have nothing to say. After all, who am I? Like the rabbi, “I am nothing!” I doubted myself—but that moment passed quickly. You, on the other hand, may still be waiting for me to say something profound...

President Obama recently learned about humility and humiliation these past few weeks. He’s eaten humble pie over the disastrous roll-out of the new healthcare website and false coverage promises. President Bush ate his own piece of pie when he prematurely declared the Iraq War a ‘Mission Accomplished’. Even the recent disaster in the Philippines is a humbling experience. Nature’s fury reminds us how much remains out of our control. It is hubris to think we are in control or that we think of ourselves equal to the gods, as any tragic character in ancient Greek drama can attest.

The words humility, humble, humiliate, human, and humus all share a common root in the Latin *humilitas*, meaning low and of the earth. One of the ways people show respect and humility in human relations is to bow or nod the head; we get low by bowing. The Chinese kowtow and the Japanese greeting bow share similarities to the European courtly ‘bow and scrape’.

In religious spheres, observant Muslims kneel and bow to Mecca five times a day to show their respect and submission to Allah. Frequent bowing should remind Muslims that all their

blessings come from God. Jews bow their heads and may rock their bodies when praying. Christians may fall to their knees as well as bow their heads in prayer.

Modern Christian pastor Andrew Murray wrote in his book *Humility: The Journey Toward Holiness*, “[Humility] is the displacement of self with the enthronement of God. Where God is all, self is nothing...Humility is the blossom of which death to self is the perfect fruit.” (pages 69 & 83)

‘...displacement of self with the enthronement of God. When God is all, self is nothing.’
Again, “I am Nothing.”

In our UU congregations we do not all bow down before the same or any idea of God. Many of us hold our personal, enlightened rational beliefs in high esteem and we can be dismissive of any non-rational belief. Overwhelming pride in one’s righteousness makes us unwelcoming to those who differ.

There’s not a whole lot about John Calvin’s reformed Christian faith that I subscribe to, but I like this. He wrote, “It is evident that [humanity] never attains to a true self-knowledge until [we have] previously contemplated the face of God, and come down after such contemplation to look into [ourselves].”

I interpret this to mean we can only know *who we are* if we recognize *that which we are not*, such as God, or that which we aspire to, such as our ultimate values. Only then can we look into our hearts and decide *who we want to be*, such as more selfish and proud, or more like an idea of God, less self-centered and closer to our high ideals.

Calvin demands we recognize God’s holiness and our human sinfulness. Moving beyond his theology of innate human depravity which I don’t subscribe to, I agree that we sin when we turn away from being who we really want to be and from the values we say we follow. When we say we respect all people as having inherent worth and dignity, but say something denigrating about people who believe in a literal idea of God, then we’re not walking humbly with our values.

Calvin further says we cannot know God until we are dissatisfied with ourselves. Dissatisfaction comes when we yearn to be something other than who we are now. I believe that is why you and I participate in religious community. Not to be told we’re sinful and feel guilty, as Calvin would have it, but to be reminded of what we aspire to and inspire us to want something better for ourselves and for the world. Dissatisfaction with the status quo motivates us to change.

I am dissatisfied with poverty and I work for better education, more opportunities, and fairer wages. I am dissatisfied with war and conflict, even if the only peace I can accomplish is in my heart, in my family, or in my congregation. I am dissatisfied with hate against transgendered persons, homosexuals, people of color, and non-Christians. Recently, the University of Georgia community was attacked with hate speech for these very things. It is shameful. It is hubris for apparently straight, white Christians to judge others. I do not believe Jesus would approve of such attacks by those who claim to follow his teachings.

In the Christian Bible, in the gospel of Matthew, Jesus is reported to have said during the Sermon on the Mount, “Blessed are the meek [or humble], for they shall inherit the earth.” The hate-filled people who sent ugly messages to the UGA Facebook page are full of themselves. They

need more humility.

In Micah 6:8 in the Hebrew Bible, the prophet Micah is asked, ‘With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high?’ Micah responds, ‘He has shown you what is good. And what does the Lord require of you but to act justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God.’

Acting justly means working for others. Loving mercy means showing compassion to others. Walking humbly means believing in something more important than yourself.

I don’t know what your God is, what you worship, or what you hold to be of ultimate worth beyond our Seven Principles. But if we try to live more closely in alignment with the Principles, we will be better people. We will reduce the gap between who we are and who we want to become.

In keeping with the spirit of our Seven Principles, the apostle Paul wrote in his letter to the Philippians (2:3-4), “Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.”

I know many of you look to the interests of others by volunteering in the larger community and in this congregation. This is one way you serve or bow to something greater than yourself. Many of you work for or sponsor justice causes and help people in need. Many of you work to save the planet’s endangered habitats and species because you revere life in all its forms. I’ve seen you carry a spider outdoors to avoid killing it because you know it has a place in the web of life. You hold the web in higher value than your own wish to get rid of something creepy.

Many of you willingly made adjustments to meet the needs of two worship services this year. You’ve sacrificed some of your precious time to give to the bigger vision of allowing this Fellowship to better serve its current members and friends as well as those yet to come, those who wish to have what you’ve already found. That’s bowing down. That’s living your high ideals of welcoming all who wish to be here. Be proud of your humble sacrifice—that’s no oxymoron.

Mohammad Ali proudly proclaimed, “I am the greatest!” Not only because he’d won boxing matches, but because he was proclaiming his pride in being black, Muslim, a conscientious objector to the Vietnam War, and a success despite being banned from boxing for ‘un-American’ convictions. Ali and other African Americans needed to declare their worth and dignity against a system and culture that wished and worked to deny it. He was declaring his worth and dignity.

But at the same time, Ali held high ideals in greater esteem than himself. He could not have fought racism and religious bigotry if he had not held his love of God and belief in peace higher than his own comfort. He sacrificed millions of dollars in endorsements and boxing titles for his principles. In this way Ali was humble. Ali had the courage, the heart, to stand up against what he felt was wrong.

Do you remember that moment when Ali held the Olympic torch in his shaking hand, and the world held its breath, wondering if he could complete the task of lighting the Olympic torch during opening ceremonies in Atlanta? We all prayed for him to manage it. And we were proud

that he succeeded. In the rear-view mirror of time and history I think we recognize his nobility and humility, even as we laugh at his outrageousness.

May you be proud of what you do for a higher cause, but may you continue to be humble before your high ideals or your God, and our shared values. May we help the meek inherit the earth by standing for something greater than ourselves. I know we have the courage for this. May we each walk more humbly every day. May it be so.

Questions for Reflection or Discussion

1. When you hear the word ‘humility’ what images, ideas, and feelings surface for you?
2. In what ways might you have experienced humility and how might this have changed you?
3. What is the relationship between pride and humility? Can you be both proud and humble?
4. What god, person, idea, or thing deserves your humble obedience or close discipleship?
Why this and how do you walk more closely to this?