



Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

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“The Problem of Pride”

© by the Reverend Alison W. Eskildsen

A sermon reflection delivered on March 11, 2018

At the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens, GA

Centering Thoughts:

Be humble, be harmless, have no pretension... Bhagavad-Gita

Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall. Proverbs 16:18

Blessed are the humble, for they shall inherit the earth. Matthew 5:5

Humility is like underwear, essential, but indecent if it shows. Helen Nielsen

Story: A telling of the myth of Arachne and Athena’s weaving contest.

Sermon:

When I arrived at the Fellowship in August 2010, I faced a moral dilemma: Should I continue the practice of parking my car in a spot specially reserved for the minister?

You may laugh, but before this I never rated a reserved parking spot. In a setting where we affirm the inherent worth and equality of all persons, and possibly beings, what justifies my receiving this special treatment?

I wondered, should I accept this privilege? I wondered, would I be perceived as too proud to park with the rest of the you? I wondered, would it be false or real humility if I gave up the spot? I probably wonder too much.

Even so, for my first few years I never parked in that reserved spot except on Sundays. I resisted my privilege. Now, I don’t resist so much.

After all, you don’t want me forever circling the parking lot or driving far down Rambling Road and risk being late for the service, do you? And when it rains, you don’t want me standing here looking like a wet cat, do you?

Occasionally, someone else has parked in my spot. My spot—with the big sign that says “Reserved for the Minister.” Hello! *I’m* the minister. I consider confronting that person with a joke

about their audacity. But what if they think I'm really not joking? What if they think I believe I'm a goddess who deserves her own parking spot? Mac Davis had it right when he sang, 'it's hard to be humble'. And I'm sure it's not just me and Mac.

Mythical stories like that of Arachne remind all of us that there is danger in excessive pride. At first glance, we might pity Arachne's end. Athena appears to be excessively jealous over a mere mortal's claim to be better. Arachne's punishment, becoming a spider who weaves forever, seems excessive and cruel.

But this is not simply a story of two bad actors. Athena serves a deeper purpose. She's a divine enforcer of what it means to be human. She symbolizes a facet of life itself: to choose how we use our gifts—for good or ill.

Humans are not gods, generally speaking. We are not perfect, try as we might. And even if we are skilled at weaving or talented in some other area, there will always be someone else who might be even more talented, or better at something we are not good at. Being humble means we recognize our own strengths and vulnerabilities. We can be proud of our skills and accomplishments, but not so proud that we think of ourselves as equal to the divines. We are not gods.

I humbly can accept the privilege of a parking space without letting it go to my head. I appreciate the gift and convenience of the reserved spot. I don't assume privileges should come my way.

When do you find it most difficult to be humble? When do you feel entitled? When does pride prevent you from admitting mistakes? When does privilege blind you to inequality? How often to you expect others to pick up after you?

If we honestly reflect on these questions we'll discover our level of humility. It will also clue us in to the health of our relationships. No one likes a boaster or narcissist. Arachne and Athena are hard to admire. But if we recognize our mistakes, treat others as equal to ourselves, criticize and blame others less, and celebrate other's skills and accomplishments, then I believe we will build better relationships. We'll also be living in accord with a prime virtue. Lao Tzu's writes in the *Tao Te Ching* (Ch. 51), "Creating without claiming, doing without taking credit, guiding without interfering, this is primal virtue."

Jesus also sets before us an example of humility by washing feet. This has become a custom among some Christians at Easter time. For someone believed to be God incarnate, stooping low to wash feet symbolizes incredible humility. No act was beneath Jesus. (John 13:14-17)

What is beneath us? Can we be that humble?

In fact, many of us are. When a spouse or parent becomes too old or sick to bathe or otherwise care for themselves, we perform such humble acts. Love calls us to this. Might love also call us to greater humility outside our circle of family or friends?

Humility, human, humanitarian, humus, and even humiliate, derive from the Latin root word *humilis*, meaning ground or earth. Only the gods and goddesses live high in the sky. We humans are made of earth, we walk on the ground, and we are mortal—made of earth we return to the earth.

May we remember we are not gods, however highly we revere ourselves.

May we be well-grounded, in touch with reality.

And may the goddess take revenge on any who dare park in my spot!

Questions for Reflection & Discussion

1. Most people struggle with pride – feeling like they know best or can do better than others. What are some ways you might embrace greater humility and lessen any sense of superiority?
2. Have you kept quiet about your role in an accomplishment in order to let someone else shine? What urged you to be humble then, and how did you feel about it (proud, conflicted, etc)?
3. How do people like Arachne – with overwhelming pride in their accomplishments or abilities – make you feel? Do you act like Athena and put them in their place, or not? Please share.