

Humility at the Level Places

(Luke 6:17-26)

Sermon delivered by The Very Rev. Matt Rhodes at Christ Church, Millwood, Virginia
Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany, February 17, 2019

In the name of the one God, creator, redeemer, and sustainer. Amen.

*Jesus came down with the twelve apostles and stood on a level place, with a great crowd of his disciples and a great multitude of people from all Judea, Jerusalem, and the coast of Tyre and Sidon. They had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases; and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured. And all in the crowd were trying to touch him, for power came out from him and healed all of them. Then he looked up at his disciples...*¹

If you think about some of the most significant moments in the life and ministry of Jesus, you will in many cases find instances of elevation or distance. In the version of today's Gospel reading found in the fifth chapter of Matthew, for instance ... what we refer to as the Sermon on the Mount ... Jesus goes up a mountain before speaking. The narrative of the Transfiguration found in each of the synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke) has Jesus together with his most trusted disciples – Peter, James and John – going up a mountain before being joined by Moses and Elijah and revealed to his followers in a new, glorious way.

In last week's Gospel reading, the crowd has pressed in on Jesus so he gets aboard a boat and goes out onto the water, away from the shore, before talking to them. In the hours before his trial, Jesus goes away from the disciples in Gethsemane to pray in seclusion. Tragically, the death of Jesus himself is a moment of physical elevation as he is raised on the cross – and magnificently, his time on earth ends with a glorious ascension to heaven.

Moments of going up, or of putting some space between himself and the crowds, mark instances when something important is about to take place. But how often do we stop to reflect on those moments when Jesus does the opposite and goes among the crowd ... or even, as in the case of today's reading, puts himself in the position of being somewhat **below** them?

There is a great power in God's revelation in the world through the incarnation of Jesus. We could easily attach the words "humble" or "humility" to this action of becoming one of us. Karl Barth takes it a step beyond and refers to it as the "humiliation" of God – the word not being used in terms of embarrassment, but rather as the Son's willingness to enter from a place of timelessness into a world bound by time and take upon himself the sins of humanity. It is "[T]he humility in which God willed to make Himself like us, the obedience of Jesus Christ in which this

¹ Luke 6:17-20 (NRSV).

self-humiliation of God and in it the demonstration of His divine majesty became a temporal event.”²

Barth’s understanding of what the incarnation meant for God and the world are a conversation for another day. For this morning, I would like you to hold on to the words “humble” and “humility” as you consider two particular parts of today’s Gospel passage: they stood on a level place, and Jesus looking up at his disciples.

Jesus standing in this place in this relationship with his disciples and a great crowd is not a moment of elevation. It is a time when Jesus is there on their level, eye-to-eye. And then just moments later, he humbles himself even further: he looks up at them. In other Gospel passages, we read where Jesus is seated and then begins to speak. We do not see that here; we only read that they gather in this place, and then he looks up and begins to speak. He is not apart from those looking to be taught or healed; he is not elevated above them.

He is simply **there**, with them. He is **present**. Even as he is bringing about an incredible moment, he is sharing in **their** experience.

It is important to remember that even today, in our lives and the lives of those in the world around us, Jesus is **still** with us. He is standing level with us wherever we are in our journeys. He is **present**. Like that day on the level place, he is sharing **our** experiences.

With that in mind, consider how much more powerful is it, too, when we – following the example of Jesus – do likewise! How much of an impact we have when we do not set ourselves apart or in a lofty position, but when we come to the level places in our communities. Think of the impact we can have ... the special moments of teaching healing that we ourselves bring about ... when we humble ourselves to be with others.

We can remind those who do not see God, or feel the presence of Christ, or think that their lives have any meaning ... any merit ... any blessing ... of the enormity of God’s love for them. We can remind them that they are being called to God, yes, but we can also show that **we** are being called to **them**. And we will be able to once again share with them that the promises Jesus shared ... indeed, from where he was, the promises that Jesus **lifted up** ... are ours **and** theirs.

*Blessed are you who are poor,
for yours is the kingdom of God.
Blessed are you who are hungry now,
for you will be filled.
Blessed are you who weep now,
for you will laugh.*

² Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics IV.1: The Doctrine of God*.

Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven.³

Amen.

³ Luke 6:20-23 (NRSV).