

Reading

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Jen Ollington, one of our Worship Associates, will share it with us.

To lose all hint of cocky and shard of arrogant, all command, all surety, all control and thirst, and return finally to sheer abashed wonder, the blessed country in you lived as a child; that is the work.

To be abashed but not afraid; to work with all your soul to bring your peculiar and particular tools to bear against the darkness, but know that your tools are borrowed and must be returned; to love with all your heart, but possess nothing and no one; that is the work.

To know that your everything is nothing without the love that spoke you into being; that is the work.

To do, with all your might, and expect a roaring nothing in return except the pleasure of having wrought well; that is the work.

To savor, to sip, to admire, to celebrate, to sing, to fight for, to stand up for, to see, to witness, to reach for each other and haul each other back to the trembling shore; that is the work.

I tell you nothing you do not know. It's not money and power and esteem and fame and cars and boats and houses and honors. It's how hard you worked for nothing the world can give you.

The only reward is love, in its uncountable forms.

“The Lowliest Virtue”

“Here is the world; beautiful and terrible things will happen.

Be not afraid.

Because this is what we are about:

We hold hope for each other when hope is hard to find.

We plant seeds that will one day grow.

We are prophets of a future not our own.

We cannot do everything,

But we can do something.

So forget your perfect offering.

There is a crack in everything.

That is how the light gets in.”

“How was school today?” I say to the 15-year-old

Upon pick-up.

“Great; I killed my math test. I’m pretty awesome at math,

And pretty much other classes too!”

“And humble too!” I say.

“Dad, you have to admit. Our family isn’t humble...”

Wait, what??

“Yeah, Mom comes home from work and she’s like “I’m awesome!”

And Ella dances around the kitchen around going:

“I’m gonna step into the spotlight!”

And you come home from church and you’re like:

‘I preached it today people!!’

We’re not so good at being humble.”

Which is all another reminder how parenting is among
 The most humbling of roles, we parents who teach most when we least think
 we're teaching.

But my eye-rolls aside, I was glad for my Emerson's observation,
 Not least because it showed me that he didn't inherit
 The family trait he gets from my side, generations back and back,
 Of overwrought self-deprecation, self-doubt, almost crippling shyness,
 Eyes cast down, kicking the dirt, wondering if we were quite
 Good enough for the team there, the test here, the school entrance
 Exam there, the person we want to ask to Prom here,
 The cafeteria cool-kid table there,
 All little and so little examinations of self-esteem and confidence
 And pride
 That some of sweat through, and others of us
 Seem to glide through with the greatest of ease.

Which is why I, maybe like some of you, was so good
 At Catholic guilt.

Blessed are the poor in spirit, said the priest during mass
 After mass of my upbringing.

And I, along with some of you, was like:

Really? Well that's great! I know how to do that!

I'm really awesome at that...!

All the while wondering, and struggling, and angst-ing
 And then angering over when oh when will this blessing

Show up, actually,
 we who – and this is all of us now –
 Hear that God loves us or the Universe loves us,
 but have a hard time loving ourselves,
 we who hear in the word ‘*humble*’ also ‘*humiliation*’
 and hurtful memories of not being enough
 in the eyes of family, friends, church, temple,
 priests, rabbis, pastors, friends, school boards, coaches, bosses.
Is humility just another word for thinking badly about yourself,
 We wonder?
Well, no thanks! Been there, done that, got the t-shirt!

I have a hunch, just a hunch, that one reason why
 So many claim these days to be spiritual and not religious,
 And decide to nurture their spirits in places other than
 Organized religion,
 Is because of the judgment and preachy fingers and trips through
 the land of guilt that so often pour off the pages of sermons
 in our memories,
 to say nothing of the ways our children, who have grown up
 in this age of terrorism,
 have come to associate religion or piety or believers with
 violence about which I have no words.

Said my daughter to me as she heard that the men who stormed
 The theatre in Paris shouted “*Allah Akbar!*” as they shot their guns:
 “*Dad, what does that mean?*”

And me telling her: *It is Arabic for 'God is Great.'*

And then silence, and then her wondering as only a child can:

Why?

Why would they say that before they shoot people?"

Which, to bring our theme back in, is a humbling question,

Humbling because I have no answer, because there is no answer,

Actually.

Beautiful and terrible things will happen,

I say as I open our sermons together this year.

Be not afraid.

Which is a statement of faith now more than ever,

Because, of course, fear is what terrorism is all about.

"I don't know why they say that, honey....I go on, the warm pizzas

We just bought for dinner in the back seat,

Because this is where all theological conversations happen these days,

In the car.

But here's what I do think – that God is crying with Paris tonight,

And Muslims are crying, and Christians, and Jews and UU's,

And all people who believe religion is meant to heal rather than hurt."

Which I tell her because that's what I do believe,

But also because as a dad and a minister

One way I resist the fear is by not letting others take the word *God* and *religion* from me and define it on their terms.

Which is why I'm always drawn to this other humility:

That God is not God's name,

As if we had the words, the language, the insight, the authority to perfectly describe the holy for everyone else, the transcendent, the awesome, the sacred that whispers to us all in life,
Each in a language we can hear in the silence, in the dawn of morning,
Just as the light comes in.

But it wasn't always this way for me, this kind of humility,
Nor perhaps for you.

And why would it be, we who have, in large part,
Been taught to believe that what being humble is about
Is thinking less of ourselves,
That what the God of our memories and movies and
Popular culture wants most is a people willing to sacrifice,
bow down on our knees, worship plaintively,
Eyes cast down, shoes kicking the dirt, meek, mild, timid,
Or conversely, asking us to do very terrible things in the name
Of religion, and not just violence, but also exclusion, bigotry,
Separating who's in and who's out.

And wouldn't we then, in response, tend to go in the other direction,
And think that churches are only for people who need a crutch,
Never mind that all of us, despite appearances, are limping,

Or believe that what being American is all about is becoming
A self-made man or self-made woman, never mind
The privilege and race and class that elevate some of us,

And hold others of us down.

And why wouldn't we laugh sarcastically with Bart Simpson, yes THAT
Bart Simpson,

Who when asked to offer a prayer of thanks says:

*"Dear God, we bought all this stuff with our own money, so thanks for
nothing."*

Which is a good segue for us, we who will gather in a week and half

For Thanksgiving, our most religious, non-sectarian holiday,

Our American Seder,

Because if we aren't humble, if we don't practice this lowliest of virtues,

How can we give thanks...

For the food we did not grow, the body we didn't create,

The blue sky we didn't paint, the stars we didn't hang,

The love around us we don't have to earn.

How are we to give thanks...if we think everything is up to us?

How are to ever get and give that reward of love spoken of in our

reading...if we believe, with measures of pride and heartache,

That what we must do is get through life alone.

So, I wonder if you will permit me one of my regular indulgences,

Which is to share with us some definitions.

Can I humbly ask your permission?

Thank you.

Pride first, the supposed other side of humility, here with the help of

Buechner:

Coming from old-English to mean self-esteem, or self-love.

Never mind the Bible, friends, that says pride is one of the 7 deadly sins.

Never mind.

Did a minister just tell us to ignore the Bible? How cool is this church!

Yes I did, at least in this case!

Because even though we are all asked to love our neighbor as ourselves,

We are also asked, we who judge ourselves so harshly,

To love ourselves as we do our neighbor...

Which doesn't mean, as Buechner says, that our pulse is supposed

To quicken every time we catch a glimpse of ourselves in the mirror,

But rather, simply, that our ability to work for our good is closely

Related to our ability to work for our neighbor's good,

Meaning: love of self and love of neighbor go hand-in-hand,

As does dislike of self and dislike of neighbor.

And when is pride, in fact, a sin, a word that doesn't mean we're terrible,

And horrible and no good, but simply that we've missed the mark?

When is pride is a sin?

When instead (says Buechner) of pride leading you to share with others the

Self you love, it leads you to keep yourself in perpetual safe-deposit,

Locked up away from others with arrogance, cockiness, stinginess,

Scarcity.

Which is why we believe in forgiveness,

Because who among us hasn't kept ourselves from others,

Or thought ourselves better than others,

Because we question our own worth?

And now for *Humility*,

Coming from I learned this week the Old French *humus*

Meaning ground, meaning low to the earth, meaning

Connected to our roots.

Said my favorite quote that I found this week on humility,

This from Farm Equipment Association of South Dakota:

“Despite all our accomplishments, we owe our existence

To a six-inch layer of topsoil and the fact it rains.”

Which is worth thinking about, isn't it, we humans who have a history

Of not acting with much humility when it comes to the ‘cherish

The living earth’ part of our Call to Ministry,

We who often confuse humility (says Buechner) with the polite

Self-deprecation of saying you're not much of a cook in the kitchen

When you know perfectly well you are (oh, this whole Thanksgiving

Spread? It was nothing...),

We who define humility as having to do with downcast eyes or misty voices

or noble stories of sacrifice

When in fact it means, simply, to see ourselves as the Spirit sees us,

Which is sisters and brothers, radically connected, deeply valued,

And worthy of respect.

Or as CS Lewis said in my second favorite line of the week,

Given to me by one of you over email:

Humility isn't thinking less of yourself; it's thinking of yourself less.'

You hear the difference?

Which is why, hear at the end, I pray,

Remembering what I mean when I say pray,

As in not asking God to change things,
But asking our prayers to change people,
Because it is people who can change things.
Will you pray with me?

*Spirit in the wind and sky and rain,
Hovering near the Eiffel Tower this morning,
Over the City of City of Light,
In the cracked hearts of women and men in that city,
And the world over who believe, at times, we are losing, or have lost,
Our humility which says that we are radically connected to each other,
Brothers and sisters, each deeply valued, each worthy of respect.
Blow your breath along the low corners of the earth,
Along the humus, the ground, where we fall so often
In fear and trembling for what will come of us, our lives,
Our children.
Blow your breath into cracked hearts,
Turn these hearts away from the impulse of protection
And fear and terror and safe-deposits,
And instead, turn these hearts, our hearts,
outward, outward, outward toward each other,
we who all of us every where limp, hurt, cry, ache, fear, grieve,
and also hope, reach, strive, inspire, comfort, love, love.
Keep us close to the ground, connected to earth and each other,
Forgive us the pride taken too far of thinking we are all alone,
And keep us reaching through the cracks, reaching for the light.
So we say Amen. And amen. And amen.*

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