Pentecost 12 Proper 16

August 23, 2020

Romans 12:1-8

Years ago, I took piano lessons. At first, it was challenging, but not too difficult. But after about 6 months, I found it hard to learn the notes my left hand had to play. I’d been in choir and band, and I was *so* familiar with the higher notes, the treble clef notes, that my brain protested as I tried to learn the lower notes on the bass clef. And, as the pieces grew more complicated, I struggled to get my left hand to move in different ways from my right hand.

Finally, I had to admit that I didn’t have the time to devote to practicing, nor a strong enough desire to keep going.

About a year later, I got a job working for a bank. I sat at a machine, taking stacks of work from tellers and running it through the machine to make sure that it all balanced. It involved a very repetitive motion with my left hand – picking up a piece of paper and dropping it in a slot – while my right hand keyed in the necessary information. I got pretty good at it, too, gaining speed and accuracy that meant I could tackle more challenging work.

My left hand’s limits with the piano weren’t limits at work. All my left hand had to do was drop items into a slot, while my right hand sailed away on the keyboard. I may have lacked the gift to play the piano well, but I had a gift for my work.

Each of us is given a different set of gifts by God. Paul reminds us in our Romans text for today that these gifts make us interconnected. He uses the body as an example. We’re one body in Christ, each of us playing a different role. But no person, no gift is more important or less important than another. Each of us has gifts that are deemed worthy and important by God, gifts to be used for the common good.

And to use those gifts in a faithful manner, Paul encourages us to think of it as presenting our bodies as a living sacrifice, being transformed by God so that what we do is good and acceptable. But transformation doesn’t happen in an instant. It takes time, it takes practice, and it requires, as Paul says, that we not think of ourselves more highly than we ought.

Those last words always bring to my mind the story of Job.

Job was a good person, but he had tendencies toward self-righteousness.

After losing everything, and being told by his friends that he must have done something to deserve it, Job was pretty angry. He complained at length about everything that had happened and declared that God wasn’t listening to him anymore. After which God rebukes Job:

“Where were you when I laid the earth’s foundations? Tell me if you know. Who set its measurements? Surely you know.  
Who stretched a measuring tape on it? …Can you issue an order to the clouds, so their abundant waters cover you? Can you send lightning so that it goes and then says to you, ‘I’m here’?”[[1]](#footnote-1)

God’s epic smackdown of Job is a reminder to Job that he needs to practice humility and remember his place in creation.

We have a strange relationship with humility. We tend to expect it of others, particularly if we don’t like them, but we also view it as a weakness. And we confuse it with humiliation, which is about degrading and diminishing others.

But humility isn’t about a lack of self-esteem or being a doormat or diminishing others. And it isn’t about denying our God-given gifts, our talents, and the ways we can use them well.

It’s about knowing our place in creation. It’s about knowing our relationship with God, and our interconnectedness with others.

Humility is about knowing that we’re utterly dependent upon God, and allowing that to transform us. It’s about remembering that we are a part of the body of Christ, where no one is *more* important or *less* important than anyone else, where all have gifts to offer for the common good.

Humility leads us to pray, “your will be done, on earth as in heaven,” and think about the ways we need to conform *our own* will to God’s, rather think about how others need to change.

Humility allows us to listen to others. It doesn’t insist upon being the center of attention all the time, but leaves ample room for others, and invites them into the conversation.

Humility takes a lot of work.

When I was in seminary, a part of my work involved being a part of group training to do pastoral visits. We began each session by reading from the Rule of St. Benedict, the instructions he gave for how people were to live in a monastery.

The edition we used included commentary from a Benedictine nun, Sister Joan Chittister, who put things into modern terms. I’ve come back to one part over and over since then. She writes:

“Benedict argues that…humility is the ability to submit ourselves to the wisdom of another. We are not the last word, the final answer, the clearest insight into anything. We have one word among many to contribute to the mosaic of life, one answer of many answers, one insight out of multiple perspectives. Humility lies in learning to listen to the words, directions, and insights of the one who is a voice of Christ for me now… [This step] brings us face to face with our struggle for power. It makes us face an authority outside of ourselves.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

I keep coming back to these words because they offer an important reminder for me. My opinion isn’t the only one that matters. My interpretation of things isn’t the only interpretation possible. I have gifts in some areas, but I am surrounded by people who have gifts I don’t have, knowledge I don’t have, people with whom I can work so we can accomplish things that are good and acceptable to God.

Remembering this and practicing it isn’t always easy, but that’s what humility does – it leads us to use *our* gifts in ways that allow others to use *their* gifts in ways that are good and acceptable to God.

If there’s anything we’ve learned from the last 6 months, it’s that our actions, our self-centeredness, can have a devastating effect on others.

But I have hope. Because, perhaps more than ever, we see just how interconnected we are, how much we need the gifts of others.

When we hear Paul’s call to live a sacrificial life, to not think more of ourselves than we ought, we need to remember that “what we cannot model, we cannot expect” of others.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Practicing humility keeps us from being conformed to the world, from internalizing the message that we can find true happiness, true peace, anywhere other than in God.

May God’s abundant grace lead us to present ourselves as living sacrifices, open to the will of God, open to the transformation that awaits.

1. Job 38:4-5a, 34-35, Common English Bible [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *The Rule of Benedict: A Spirituality for the 21st Century*, Sister Joan Chittister, p. 84 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Chittister, p. 275 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)