

**Practicing Humility**  
Philippians 2:1-5  
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While attending graduate school in my mid-twenties I lived in Shawnee, Oklahoma, a town of about 28,000 people thirty miles east of Oklahoma City. There I owned my first home. 1,064 square feet, brick, built in 1928. I was pretty pleased with that place.

My home was where my friends hung out. Coming over for dinner, to study, or for the parties that I hosted most weekends. Among the reasons my house became the hang out were the nice big deck in back, the hot tub, and the fact that I kept my house pretty clean (which is not something you could say for the houses and apartments of many of my friends).

My closest friend during this era was Marty Peercy. He's been here a couple of times, so some of you have met him. Marty was a townie who is now living back in Shawnee, though he has ventured to Chicago and Portland over the years. Marty is one of the smartest folk I know, a musician and poet, and a staunch non-conformist. Our favourite topic of conversation is literature, and he once said that the best single-sentence description of Scott Jones is "He tried reading *The Catcher in the Rye* when he was a teenager, but couldn't identify with it, so he didn't finish it."

Needless to say, Marty didn't have the problem with Holden Caulfield that I had.

Marty has been that friend whom I go to when I have a big decision to make or when I'm depressed or when there is a crisis. I know that I can trust Marty to tell me what I need to hear and not simply what I want to hear.

Back in those grad school days, he'd often come over for dinner and by the time we had cooked together, eaten, and sat out on the deck talking, we'd have polished off at least a couple bottles of wine.

It was on one of those evenings that we were discussing something I was working on for school, when Marty thought I said about the funniest thing. He still teases me about it on occasion. What I said was, "I just wrote a great paper on humility."

Now, the reason you laugh is part of what I was addressing in the paper. There is a common misperception about the virtue of humility, that it is having a low opinion of one's self and one's accomplishments. But, that is not a virtue in my opinion. Virtues are supposed to be character traits of excellence, so there is an inherent contradiction in excelling at being low.

I believe rather that humility is having a proper sense of one's self in relation to other people. As with all virtues, it is the mean between two vices. On one end is the vice of pride—thinking more highly of one's self and one's accomplishments than one ought to.

On the other end is the vice of thinking too little of one's self and one's accomplishments. This is the vice of pusillanimity, a great old English word that isn't used

enough.

You've likely known pusillanimous people (I'm going to say the word a few times because it is just so much fun to say. Pusillanimous. Try it yourselves.). They are constantly devaluing themselves and putting themselves down, never standing up for themselves or defending their rights.

Back in June a video put out by the company Pantene, which sells hair care products, went viral. The video was about how women, in particular, often say they are sorry in situations that aren't their fault. The video encouraged women to quit apologizing and instead to "shine strong."

Recently I read an interview that Dr. Maya Angelou gave in which she discussed this issue and said she had no patience for it. According to her humility is something very different. She said, "Humility comes from inside out. It says someone was here before me and I'm here because I've been paid for. I have something to do and I will do that because I'm paying for someone else who has yet to come."

Like St. Paul, Dr. Angelou emphasizes the communal nature of the virtue. Paul believed that it helps to create the unity of the church. Dr. Angelou believed that it ties the generations together, as we acknowledge our accomplishments and self-worth by recognizing the role that others played in those and how ours will play a role in the accomplishments of others.

What, then, is the relationship between humility and "The Work of Love," which is our topic this summer? There are two connections, I think. One is that humility is required if we are going to be successful over the long term in our relationships. The other connection is that those relationships teach us humility.

Thomas Merton, who was a Cistercian monk and prolific author, claimed that we find our true selves in our closest friendships. He wrote:

I cannot discover God in myself and myself in [God] unless I have the courage to face myself exactly as I am, with all my limitations, and to accept others as they are, with all their limitations.

And it is our closest relationships that instruct us in these things. The people we love teach us to not think either too much or too little of ourselves. Their love and involvement in our lives constantly reminds us that we are valued. While, on the other hand, they also keep us from getting too enamored with ourselves. No one can remind you that you aren't quite the hot stuff you think you are as your mother or your spouse.

In his book *Sacred Unions: A New Guide to Lifelong Commitment*, Thomas Breidenthal, Dean of Religious Life at Princeton University, claims that the humble act of self-giving is essential to the true love of marriage. He affirms that humility is not a denial of our own dignity, but "is the practice whereby we recognize that others besides us are also God's children."

No relationship calls us more fully to that obligation than marriage. When we fall in love with another person, we are acknowledging their worth. That act alone is a step toward genuine humility.

Beyond that original acknowledgement of another's worth, true romantic love requires

radical self-giving. In marriage we share who we are with another person, connecting our life to theirs. Breidenthal writes that it's "risky to give someone else a share in my body, my possessions, my emotional and intellectual life." Risky because we make ourselves vulnerable to "violation, betrayal, or indifference."

But the good side of the risk-taking is the spirit of adventure that is accompanied by generosity and loyalty as we "totally and exclusively" give ourselves to another and receive them in return.

For a marriage to last over time and model Christian love, we must give of ourselves to our spouse. Not one partner doing all the giving and another benefiting from it. But mutual, equitable giving. And what is true paradigmatically for marriage is also true in different degrees for every one of our love relationships with friends and family.

Three days ago an article appeared on the Huffington Post website discussing humility. It listed "seven traits humble people have mastered that allow them to live accomplished, fulfilled and happy lives." Those were: focusing their energy on others, being conscientious, being guided by a moral compass in decision-making, viewing happiness as a journey, excelling as leaders, being patient, and the final one was having strong relationships. About this last one, the article said, "when it comes down to it, most people don't want a narcissistic friend or partner."

Jesus taught that even leaders must be servants, demonstrated by his washing the feet of his disciples. It is this attitude that St. Paul has in mind here in the Letter to the Philippians.

The truly great among us are those who do not focus on their own worth and achievements, but instead, they are the ones who try to lift up other people. A humble person understands that their self-worth is inextricably tied up with other people. There will be times when the needs of another person surpass our own, when we must be willing to give, maybe even sacrifice something significant to us. But they also know that when they are at their very best, they are fulfilling the work of those who helped them along the way. And by doing their best, the humble person is helping others in return. We should, then, strive every day to be excellent, which includes humility, for this is how we give lovingly to others.

Humility, then, as Paul teaches us, leads to unity based upon the common concern for each other's interests. And a marriage, a friendship, a family, a workplace, a church, a city, even a nation filled with these kinds of people, humble people concerned with the needs of others, will thrive as a place of joy and love.

Let the same mind be in you that was also in Christ Jesus.