

# Proud To Be Humble?

A Remembrance Day sermon presented by The Rev. Philip A. Rodgers presented Sunday, November 5<sup>th</sup>, 2017  
at Trinity United Church in Malton, related to Matthew 23:1-12

Proud to be humble? Now there are two words that don't belong in the same sentence. In 2003 two psychologists in what has been dubbed "the cookie experiment." The experiment was about power and about how power affects entitlement.

In *The Great Cookie Experiment*, three participants were asked to discuss various political issues and make policy recommendations. One of the three participants was given the role of "judge" and asked to assign points rating the quality of the recommendations made by the other two participants. This placed the judge in a "high power" position relative to the other two. About thirty minutes into the discussion the experimenter brought the three participants five cookies on a plate. And the number of cookies was carefully chosen.

Five cookies. Three people. Someone isn't getting a second cookie. Who would that be?

What the researchers observed was that the person in the high-power position was significantly more likely to take a second cookie compared to the other two participants. In addition, the person in the high-power position was more likely to eat with their mouth open and to leave more crumbs on the table.

Power affects us. Power tempts us to take more cookies for ourselves. And power tempts us to leave messes for others to clean up. In the lectionary reading from Matthew Jesus says: *All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted.* I am keenly aware (in light of findings like the cookie experiment) of how power adversely affects us. This is worrisome given how we are often embedded in various organizational structures where power is distributed in a hierarchical fashion.

So we can appreciate the imperative in Jesus's call to eschew status and power to humble ourselves and become a servant. And yet, it is hard if not impossible to wholly extract ourselves from the power structures we live with and work within. My particular worry here is with the spiritually corrosive nature of power. Because I suspect that the scribes, Pharisees and teachers of the Law viewed themselves as "servant leaders." And I expect that they saw the various political, social and religious institutions they led as organizations that served the people. And yet, as Jesus points out, something had gone wrong. Something about being in "high places" was having a corrosive effect. We are left with the question: if we can't wholly extract ourselves from hierarchical power arrangements, how might we resist the allure of power, and keep under control the desire to exalt ourselves?

Even those whose traditions fall into the more reformed practices are not immune to such obsessions...clerical collars, preaching gowns, chancel robes and proper titles. I recall the many discussions among us new clergy centered on whether we should be addressed as "Pastor" or "Reverend" or just by our first names in order to have our authority respected? And we are not averse to having our names boldly posted on our church sign at the curbside. No, we're not so different from the scribes and Pharisees....

Of course, the problem actually goes much deeper than what we wear or what we're called. Phylacteries and fringes, vestments and titles all have their place when kept in perspective. Jesus' concern, then and now, is the way those things get out of perspective, the way our motivations for doing them become distorted so that they become an end in themselves, the way they become substitutes for what we are really about: glorifying God and living as disciples.

If human nature made it hard for the scribes and Pharisees to keep their motives pure, to practice what they preached, we in the 21st century church are perhaps even more disadvantaged. We still have the same human nature, and we're embedded in a culture that values appearances, status, wealth, position, individualism, materialism and consumerism. Coupled with the fact that the role of the church in society is greatly diminished, it's no wonder that our tendency to do things to make ourselves stand out--as individuals and as an institution--can make us forget why we're Christians, and can lead us away from the kind of discipleship Jesus is calling us.

As we hear in today's reading, Jesus consistently reminded his followers that "the greatest among you will be your servant" and "all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted." So we're caught between what the gospel calls us to and what our culture upholds, and that's where we often find ourselves in the same bind the Pharisees were ensnared in, the bind my mother understood so well when she demanded, "Don't do as I do; do as I say." We believe one thing, we hold it in our hearts, yet our behavior all too often belies what we say we believe.

If you think I am being too hard on you, on me, on all of us who call ourselves Christians, think about what our lives as average churchgoers are like. We go to church on a Sunday morning and we hear the good news of the gospel; we're refreshed by the sermon and the hymns that we might put a few extra dollars in the plate for outreach and we vow to drop off some food for the local food pantry. We feel refreshed by our worship, and a bit self-satisfied, if we're completely honest, because, look, we've been to church. And that's a good thing, isn't it? And we are good people, are we not?

Mac Davis, a popular Country/Folk singer of the 70's set it to music when he wrote:

*Oh Lord it's hard to be humble  
When you're perfect in every way  
I can't wait to look in the mirror  
Cause I get better looking each day  
To know me is to love me  
I must be a hell of a man  
Oh Lord It's hard to be humble,  
But I'm doing the best that I can*

We say a prayer as we leave that we might be better disciples. And then we walk out of church, and nine times out of ten, we leave our discipleship behind. We don't leave it behind on purpose, of course. It's just that it's hard for us to connect Jesus saying "Love your neighbor as yourself" with the news of the illegal immigrants who are seeking out our jobs or with the homeless man sitting on the street, hoping to get enough change for a hamburger at McDonalds.

It's hard to connect Jesus' command to "turn the other cheek" with sabres rattling and requests for more defense spending by government; and reports of violence around the world. It's hard to heed Jesus' injunction not to "worry about what you shall eat or what you shall drink or what you shall wear" when the economy is so fragile. It's hard to live up to our ideals; as Paul succinctly put it in his letter to the Romans, we do those things we hate and we fail to do those things we want to do. We don't practice what we preach. There's only one answer to this dilemma, one antidote for what ails us. And that answer is God's grace.

God's grace for us means that no matter how many times we walk out of church leaving our discipleship behind us, God will give us yet another opportunity to live more fully into it. No matter how badly we fail to live out our discipleship, to practice what we preach, God's love and God's grace are still there for us, still hold us and comfort us and sustain us. We will always have yet one more chance...one more chance to get it right, to embrace Jesus' call to be servants, to see our neighbours at every turn, to see them and to love them, unselfishly, unreservedly. That's what Jesus teaches over and over again — and Jesus never fails to practice what he preaches.