

Scripture: Romans 12:3; Matthew 20:20-28
Message: Ripples of Serving
March 8, 2020; Bethel CRC, Brockville, ON
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Lent 2

As I was working on this theme of humility and service, this quote came to mind:
“Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely.”

This quote has a very interesting context. It was written by Lord Acton in a series of letters to Bishop Creighton in the mid to late 1800's. In one letter he wrote:

“I cannot accept your canon that we are to judge Pope and King unlike other men, with a favourable presumption that they did no wrong. If there is any presumption it is the other way against holders of power, increasing as the power increases....Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Great men are almost always bad men, even when they exercise influence and not authority: still more when you super-add the tendency or the certainty of corruption by authority. There is no worse heresy than that the office sanctifies the holder of it.”

Yes, that's a bit of older English. The point he is making is that just because a person has a position of authority or particular office, that does not justify or excuse corrupt behaviour. However, people who have positions of great influence or authority sometimes think that they are above the standards of “mere mortals.” They think that they can do what they want, and get away with it. They are important enough that they are entitled to live by a different standard.

In the last couple of years, this has been addressed in our denomination as the concern of “abuse of power.” It's the idea that a person in authority, whether that's a pastor or teacher or office-bearer, must not take advantage of those under their authority or those who look up to them. They must not abuse the relationship of trust that people may express to those who are in positions of authority.

In simple terms, it is called abuse. It's an expression of authority that hurts others. It's using authority or power to take advantage of others. It's taking a position that power defines worth and importance, and those with less power are less important and of less worth.

Then we must listen closely to the words of Romans 12:3, “For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of

you.”

Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought.

Think of yourself with sober judgment.

A healthy perspective is to think of ourselves with a good dose of humility.

We might get the impression that humility = humiliation. To be humble means to beat yourself down, deny that you are good at ANYthing, to be self-effacing to the extreme. But that need not be. Humility is about seeing life as a level playing field. You need not think or pretend you are the worst of all people in order to be humble.

‘Humility’ comes from *humilis*, Latin for ‘on the ground,’ or *humus*, Latin for ‘earth.’ This origin of the word suggests that being humble is being ‘down to earth,’ not ‘up in the clouds’ where one doesn’t belong. It need not mean grovelling in the dirt while others stand erect and dignified; it might mean being solidly a member of the human family by not trying to opt out of it upwardly” (see Robert C. Roberts, *Spirituality and Human Emotion, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982, p. 62*).

I may have a position of authority, but that doesn’t make me better or more important than anyone else. “Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought.” The sober judgment with which I look at myself is flavoured with the grace of God. As a member of the human race, I am a sinner in the same way as everyone else in this room and on this earth. By the grace of God in Jesus Christ, I am a forgiven sinner and adopted as a child of God, in the same way as every other believer in this room and on this earth. My position gives me no greater status or authority or power for my personal advantage. I am called to humble service for my Lord and Master, to use the gifts that God has given me for his glory, in the same way as every other child of God in this room and on this earth.

Jesus describes the expression of greatness as being a servant: “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” (Matthew 20:25-28)

It’s not about thrones and authority and power and influence over others and jockeying for position. It’s about service, helping others, taking a position equivalent to a slave. Here is some major, counter-cultural thinking. It’s not the message that you will read in the headlines. It’s not the message that gets politicians elected. It *is* the message that God has been giving

for a long time, about his way of doing things.

Love the Lord your God with all that you are. Love your neighbour as yourself. Look out for the other person, as you would look out for yourself. Serve others, even as you take care of yourself.

All around us we see a growing polarization. It's one side or the other, you're right or you're wrong; and if you don't agree with me, you're wrong. In fact, you're not just wrong, you're ignorant and blind for not being able to see what is right. The polarization we see does not respect those who are different; it rejects them as wrong, bad, or even evil.

This polarization highlights and develops a spirit of fear. Not only are people wrong, but they are terrible and awful and we should be afraid of them. It might be the Muslims or the Trump supporters, Liberals or Conservatives, or the environmentalists, or the religious people or whatever label is given to "those people."

Consider the response to polarization and fear as being service, to love your neighbour, to get to know them, and to serve one another, even those we disagree with, those who are on "the other side." This is living out the values of our church: caring, sharing, trusting, welcoming.

Jesus also faced the opposition of those who refused to believe him. He teaches us, in word and by his own example, that service is the key response. "For even the Son of Man did not come to *be served*, but to *serve*, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

The heart of service becomes an expression of who we are, how we live. It is the character that develops within us. It is a priority we choose to follow, because that is who Jesus calls us to be. We are becoming like him, one who came to serve, not to be served.

This is how we understand the meaning and purpose of Jesus' ministry. It was not about power and influence and imposing changes and rules on a stubborn world. It was about service, giving, humility, sacrifice. That way of service would change lives. Yes, it would win a victory over sin. And it would be lived out in followers of this Saviour who continue to show the love and hope of God in the service they show to others. The way of service will have an impact on changing hard hearts.

In living that life of service, the ripples of grace expand from humble hearts to impact those around us. In our humble service we desire to reflect Jesus, to be like him and reveal his love to others.

This might not be the kind of lifestyle that makes a person popular. We live in a celebrity culture. All around us, the more people are paid, the more attention they get, the more power they have, the more they are served. In these verses, Jesus tells us that, for *his* followers, it's not about attention and high wages and power and being served; it's about giving humble service.

Jesus says, "Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave to all."

In view of God's mercy...by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of you."

Look to our Servant leader and Saviour, Jesus, and follow him with a humble, yet confident, life of service. Every time we approach the Lord's table, we are reminded of his humble service. We take and eat and drink and remember that Jesus gave his life for us. As we take and eat and drink, we perform a sign that we believe in Jesus. We believe in his way of doing things. We believe in his gospel. We believe his path of service as the path to true greatness.

Grace is given to each of us. Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought. May the ripples of service flow from a heart that surrenders to Jesus, rippling into the lives of others with his grace.

Amen.