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Learning
+
Humility

A YEAR OF SEARCHING
FOR A VANISHING
VIRTUE



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The Hard Moon

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Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.

JESUS (MATTHEW 11:29)

Because Christ had thus humbled Himself before God, and God was ever before Him, He found it possible to humble Himself before men too, and to be the Servant of all.

ANDREW MURRAY

(((((FIRST WEEK)))))

AN INHERENT CONTRADICTION?

It is a beautiful cold morning and the meteorologist says it is supposed to snow throughout the day. So, I build a warm fire and decide I'm in for the day.

By now it's mid-afternoon and I know that Carolynn will be nervous about leaving the mail in the mailbox overnight; mail theft is a real possibility in our rural area. If I collect the mail now Carolynn will rest easier tonight. Our mailbox is half a mile down the road and with this snow (fully seven inches now and well on its way to ten, maybe twelve) driving will be difficult. Thus, I decide to walk down and secure the mail. Besides, I am wondering if this little task just might be a small act of humility for me. I layer my clothes, take my trekking poles, and set out.

The road is quite deserted of cars—plow trucks have yet to come through. After collecting the mail I decide to leave the road and make my way back home through the woods. This route is more difficult. The snow is wetter and deeper than I thought and I am wishing I had worn my snowshoes.

The stillness of the woods allows me to meditate a bit on my humility project. I realize these journals could one day become public. Writing on this particular topic while knowing that others might someday read it carries with it an inherent danger . . . perhaps an inherent contradiction. I think I'll just hold the matter before the Lord for now.

READING SLOWLY

Today *The Cloud of Unknowing* comes to mind. I think I remember two or three chapters in it devoted to the subject of humility. I'll look them up and see what I can learn. With *The Cloud* I will need to take it exceedingly slow, sitting with any one passage for an extended time. In my past excursions into *The Cloud* I have tended to breeze through a section and afterward walk away confused. Or worse yet, I would arrogantly assume that the book has nothing to teach me. So, I need to remember that here slow, slow, slow is the way forward.

THE SUPREME TOUCHSTONE

Biblical passages on humility abound, but the supreme touchstone has to be the example of Jesus. Paul describes it so wonderfully that it is best quoted in full:

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,
 who, though he was in the form of God,
 did not regard equality with God
 as something to be exploited,
 but emptied himself,

taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
he *humbled* himself
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross. (Phil 2:5-8)

Once we begin thinking of Jesus as the touchstone for an understanding of humility we see that everything is there.

- Strength. Courage. Competence.
- No domination. No self-centered arrogance. No easy pushover.

THE DIVINE PARADIGM

By meditating on Jesus' life we see humility take on flesh and blood.

- A humble birth in an obscure village.
- The growing-up years in quiet obscurity.
- Magnificent teachings to “the sat upon, the spat upon, the ratted on.”
- The Twelve chosen without regard to position or status or title.
- The wonder-filled miracles that did indeed draw enormous attention. And note carefully how Jesus handles all this fame without manipulation, without control, without domination.
- The borrowed donkey for his entry into Jerusalem; the borrowed room for his Last Supper.
- The disciplined silence throughout a mock trial and conviction.
- The enormous courage of suffering for the sins of the whole world. This has to be the supreme example of humility.
- The cry of abandonment, “*Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani*, My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?”
- The cry of humble triumph, “It is finished.”

As I look at this all it begins to dawn on me that Jesus is indeed the divine paradigm for conjugating all the verbs of humility.

I'm also reading along in the many other Scripture passages on humility. So much to ponder—wow! I'm beginning to think I will need to take a private retreat in order to soak more completely in the biblical witness.

☾ ☾ ☾ ☾ ☾ SECOND WEEK ☽ ☽ ☽ ☽ ☽

THIS LITTLE ACT OF LOVING

I found the pertinent section on humility from *The Cloud*. There are three key chapters—thirteen, fourteen, and fifteen. I think I will stay with them for a week or so and see what I learn. Here is a statement I especially like which connects loving contemplation to humility. I found it in chapter twenty-five: “As I said before, this little act of loving called contemplation mysteriously contains humility and charity, as well as all the other virtues.” I’ll need to sit with this one for a while.

STRUCK BY THREE THINGS

Coming back to *The Cloud* after several years away from it I am immediately struck by three things.

First, I am struck by the refreshing beauty of a non-self-promoting author. Today it seems that an author’s writing skills or whether they actually have something to say are far less important than the size of the author’s platform, how popularity can be increased, and how much coverage the author can garner. On and on *ad nauseam*. *The Cloud*’s language reveals an articulate and engaging author. But, while scholars have worked hard to discover the

identity of this author, all efforts have failed. I rather imagine this is just the way our anonymous author wanted it.

I have no answer to our contemporary dilemma. But I am refreshed by the author's complete freedom from human praise. Perhaps his/her personal obscurity is an important teaching in itself . . . teaching us that Christ should be the focus of attention and his followers become more unassuming, more kind, more humble. How would this teaching play in our narcissistic culture?

Second, I am struck by how dynamic and contemporary the message of *The Cloud* feels. The one specific detail we do know about this book is that our anonymous author is writing to a twenty-four-year-old who is also anonymous to us. Talk about speaking to the heart needs of Millennials! Here is a resource par excellence for the twenty-something person who wants to move beyond the superficialities of modern culture.

Third, I am struck by the gentle wisdom found in *The Cloud*. This is true for the entire volume, and never more so than when the author touches on the topic of humility. I wonder, *What is the connection between wisdom and humility?* I don't know, I just wonder. I'd like to tease this out in the days ahead.

(((((THIRD WEEK)))))

THE AWFUL RUST OF SIN

The Cloud's guidance on humility is imminently practical and filled with pastoral care. It begins with the simple yet profound definition: "humility is seeing yourself as you really are. It's that simple." And I concur, "Yes, it is that simple."

The word *humility* comes from the Latin *humilitas*, meaning "grounded" or "from the earth." Think of our word *humus* (earth,

soil). Hence, with humility we are brought back to earth. We don't think of ourselves higher than we should. Nor do we think of ourselves lower than we should. No pride or haughtiness. No self-deprecation or feelings of unworthiness. Just an accurate assessment of who we actually are. Our strengths and competencies. And, yes, our weaknesses and shortcomings.

And this is exactly where *The Cloud* turns our attention. We have no idea if our anonymous author had read Aristotle, but he (could our author be she?) clearly understands the value of self-knowledge. "Self-knowledge is the only way to get and keep the virtue of humility." *The Cloud* adds, "Don't flinch in the face of the tremendous work involved. Get to know yourself. Yes, it is backbreaking labor. Embrace it. Through it, you'll experience God as he is. I don't mean you'll know God completely. . . . But when you get to know yourself better as the mortal human you are, your soul grows in humility, and you'll know God as fully as possible on earth."

So, how do we experience this self-knowledge? *The Cloud* teaches that "self-reflection" is the best way for us to know ourselves as we truly are. In a posture of deep humility in itself our anonymous author states, "I will admit that those who sin on a regular basis (and I have and do) need this sort of self-reflection. We must be humbled by the memory of our sinfulness and past mistakes, until the awful rust of sin is scrubbed away."

Right alongside *The Cloud's* stress on the importance of self-knowledge is the qualification that self-knowledge is "an imperfect humility." The author's point being that a focus on knowing the self as fully as possible still leaves us with a focus on the self.

The move from an "imperfect humility" to "perfect humility" comes as we are enabled by divine grace to turn from ourselves to God alone. The author writes, "The best way to grow in humility is not through reflecting on our weaknesses but by remembering

God's goodness and love. . . . 'Perfect' humility comes when you experience God's goodness and superabundant love."

Our anonymous author does add a sobering note. In this life "perfect humility" is a temporary, almost fleeting experience. It comes "when, by grace, you allow the hidden love of your pure heart to press against the dark cloud of unknowing between you and God." Even though our experience is "fleeting" our counselor/author speaks a word of encouragement: "I . . . want you to be able to recognize perfect humility so you can set it up in your heart as a sign of love. It becomes something to aim for. . . . I believe that the mere awareness of perfect humility will help you be more humble."

SØREN KIERKEGAARD

Somewhere in his *Journal* I remember Søren Kierkegaard writing, "Now, with God's help, I shall become myself." I rather think this fits quite nicely with the teaching of *The Cloud* on humility.

A SIMPLE PRAYER

A simple prayer has been drifting in and out of my consciousness in recent days. I haven't gotten the wording quite right and so decided that writing it out might help me articulate the inner yearnings.

Loving Lord Jesus, I humbly ask that you would . . .

Purify my heart,

Renew my mind,

Sanctify my imagination, and

Enlarge my soul.

Amen.

I think it would be good to stay with this prayer for a while.

THE HUMAN SIDE AND THE DIVINE SIDE

Took a hike today with my little prayer as my companion and sensed that there are two sides to its answer: the human side and the divine side.

On the human side

- With regard to *heart purity*, I am *to consider* tenderly the crucifixion of our Lord Jesus Christ. I am *to see* his heart as an open wound of love toward all humanity. And I am *to feel* the divine love pouring out of his wounded heart for me.
- With regard to a *renewed mind*, I am *to think* on whatever is true and honorable and just and pure and pleasing and commendable (Phil 4:8). Not all the time, but whenever I am able.
- With regard to a *sanctified imagination*, I am *to picture* the new heaven and the new earth, the new Jerusalem, the river of the water of life bright as crystal, and the tree of life on either side of the river whose leaves are for the healing of the nations (Rev 21–22). Imagine that! Picture this, not constantly, only as I can.
- With regard to an *enlarged soul*, I am *to find* people I can serve. In small ways, and even large ways. Whenever possible.

On the divine side

- With regard to *heart purity*, God alone purifies the heart. God alone will straighten out the twistedness of all desires. God alone will radiate light into every dark corner.
- With regard to a *renewed mind*, God alone will train the mind into deep habit patterns of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit (Rom 14:17).
- With regard to a *sanctified imagination*, God alone slowly, slowly, slowly channels all the imaginings into that pure stream which is comprised of the good and the true and the beautiful.

- With regard to an *enlarged soul*, God alone will place deep within the subterranean chambers of the heart and the mind and the imagination an understanding of the overwhelming preciousness of every single person.

Then came this authoritative word: remember that God is . . .

- quick to forgive
- eager to heal
- glad to restore

(((((FOURTH WEEK)))))

MY SEARCH FOR ELENA FERRANTE

Right now I am reading an essay Lar gave me from *The Atlantic*: “My Search for Elena Ferrante.” It is about an Italian pseudonymous author who goes to great lengths to hide her identity, maintaining only that her identity lies in her writing. Hmm. Does anonymity reflect an underlying humility?

CAPTIVATED MY MIND

At the church service this morning I was immediately struck by the last stanza in the processional hymn, “O God, Our Help in Ages Past.” The words captivated my mind and I heard little else. I decided that this stanza was what I needed to focus on at this time. It is a stanza that is omitted in the hymnbooks I have at home.

Time like an ever-rolling stream,
 bears all our years away;
 they fly forgotten, as a dream
 dies at the op'ning day.

And what does this have to do with humility? Well, it most certainly puts all our “magnificent accomplishments” in their place! . . . “They fly forgotten, as a dream dies at the op’ning day.”

THE LAKOTA VIRTUES

Since I am using the Lakota calendar to frame these journal entries, I thought it might be useful to consider Lakota cultural ideals as I go along. The twelve Lakota virtues create a nice frame for a year of reflection, one for each of the next twelve months.

They are

- Humility
- Perseverance
- Respect
- Honor
- Love
- Sacrifice
- Truth
- Compassion
- Bravery
- Fortitude
- Generosity
- Wisdom

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