

**Confident Humility**  
Sermon, June 9, 2013, First UCC, Northfield  
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This sermon began as a chapel talk two months ago at St Olaf College. Pastor Bob Griggs was kind enough to attend and told Pastor Todd that he liked it and they asked me to give it as a sermon today. I told them that the only problem was that the first part of it overlaps a sermon I gave here ten years ago. The consensus was that I flatter myself if I think that people would remember what I said ten years ago and that I should be more homilectically humble. At any rate, if you remember only one thing from a decade ago, it would be from our first reading, which has one of the most extra-ordinary assertions every made. It's worth noting that for most of the time since it was written, the tradition had it that Moses was the sole author of the Torah, including this selection from the book of Numbers. The context is that in the previous chapter the Israelites are wandering in the desert and two men—Eldad and Medad--begin to prophesy. Joshua is appalled and runs to Moses and says, "My lord Moses, stop them." But Moses says it's fine with him if *everyone* had the spirit of prophesy.

Numbers 12: 2-8: [Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses] and they said, "Has the LORD spoken only through Moses? Has he not spoken through us also?" And the LORD heard it. Now the man Moses was very humble, more humble than anyone else on the face of the earth. Suddenly the LORD said to Moses, Aaron, and Miriam, "Come out, you three, to the tent of the meeting." So the three of them came out. Then the LORD came down in a pillar of cloud, and stood at the entrance of the tent, and called Aaron and Miriam; and they both come forward. And he said, "Hear my words: When there are prophets among you, I the LORD make myself known to them in visions; I speak to them in dreams. Not so with my servant Moses; he is entrusted with all my house. With

him I speak face to face—clearly, not in riddles; and he beholds the form of the LORD. Why then were you not afraid to speak against my servant Moses?”

Our second reading is from Job 42: 5-6: The context is that after Job and his friends have their lengthy arguments about whether God is punishing Job because of his sins, God appears to Job in a violent whirlwind, like the earthquake and the storm of our earlier hymn, and then Job says this to God: “I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you; therefore I recant and repent, being but dust and ashes.”

So I would like to talk about humility, though not because I’m an expert in experiencing it. Indeed, for me to claim that I know what humility is all about from the inside would be show that in fact I don’t; it would be analogous to bragging that I have the world’s biggest inferiority complex. It may have been true, but once I assert it I deny it. That’s how I know that, contrary to the earlier tradition, Moses could not have written all of the Torah, in particular the part that says he was the most humble person on the face of the earth. We could imagine a truly humble man thinking that in all honesty he is quite humble, maybe even thinking that he’s more humble than anyone he knows (though then we would begin to wonder). But there’s no way he could say that he’s the most humble person on the face of the earth; to wrote it would be to deny it. So someone else said it, and the question is why; why make such a big point of it in this context.

I confess that I have studied humility at a distance, and I think it’s useful to distinguish several different varieties of it, especially distinguishing intellectual and spiritual humility. Intellectual humility is admitting that there’s a lot you don’t know; its patron saint is Socrates, who was puzzled when the

Delphic Oracle said that he was the wisest man in Athens. When he checked out those who called themselves wise—the Sophists—he found that they didn’t know what they were talking about, but they didn’t know that they didn’t know. He, on the other hand, thought he knew nothing other than that he knew nothing, so he at least knew one thing more than those that didn’t know that they didn’t know. The practical advantage of intellectual humility is that you are open to being taught; indeed, Socrates concluded that the main barrier to increasing knowledge was not ignorance but presumed knowledge. To be teachable is to have the confidence to admit that you have a lot to learn.

Spiritual humility is the avoidance of self-righteousness, the avoidance of the sort of pride that inflates one’s moral status. Intellectual and spiritual humility are natural lovers and tend to seek each other, though not necessarily; Socrates hardly displayed spiritual humility during his trial in Athens, and the Gospel of John does not show much intellectual humility in Jesus Christ. The Latin root for humility is *humus*, or earth, so when Job recognized his limits, his being dust and ashes, he finally showed he was properly and humbly grounded.

What humility is *not* is the sort of obsequiousness we see in Charles Dickin’s Uriah Heep. And it is not the sort of self abasement we find in St Benedict’s *Rule* for monasteries. St Benedict lists twelve steps of humility, including one about convincing yourself that you are inferior to everyone and that you are a worm, not a person. Another one is that you avoid laughing out loud. I have come to know some of the Monks at St Johns, the Benedictine monastery up north; they are some of the most jovial folks I know. So a few years ago I asked them how they understand Benedict’s steps of humility. Well, they laughed out loud. It turns out they do what we do; they see commas instead of periods in the revered texts. They agreed that the point of humility is not so

much to think less of ourselves, it's more to think of ourselves less, to avoid making ourselves the center of our attention.

Moses, for example, was no shrinking violet; in the Torah Moses is portrayed as smashing tablets, whacking rocks instead of talking to them, and always arguing, especially with God. In fact, in the previous chapter, just before this rave review of his humility, listen to what he says to God. The context is that some of the Israelites are getting sick of the cuisine, whining for meat and melons instead of manna, and we are told "Then the Lord became very angry." And then we are told that Moses was displeased--at God--and he says to God, "Why have you treated your servant so badly? Did I conceive all this people? Did I give birth to them? Where am I to get meat to give to all this people? If this is the way you are going to treat me, put me to death at once." Well, this man is no doormat, even in front of the Master of the Universe. Whatever is meant by his humility, it cannot be confused with timidity.

That's why I have doubts about the suggestion that what enabled Moses to have face time with God, to see holy ground and to hear God when others see only a strange bush, is that in almost Buddhist fashion his ego must have shrunk to a vanishing point, and that that is why his uncluttered field of vision enabled him to experience dimensions of spiritual reality that lesser prophets--especially those with the sort of self-concept that demands attention--could not experience, their egos getting in the way. Instead of a vanishing ego, I think it more likely that it was a matter of the *location* of his ego in his field of attention, rather than simply its size. If your ego is always front and center of your window on experience, even a wimpy ego can block the view. But if it's off to the side and back a ways, even a solid, well-nourished ego is compatible with perceptive vision of delicate dimensions. A person needs a healthy self-concept and worthy self-respect in order to maintain the sort of integrity we associate with

Moses. You need a definite self if you are going to be true to yourself, and Moses definitely had one.

So I suggest that what made Moses most humble was his keeping himself and other things as well in proper perspective. This requires an open heart. In his book *The Heart of Christianity* Marcus Borg points out that the heart is referred to over a thousand times in the Bible, and that experience of the sacred is always tied to having an open heart rather than a hard heart. In a chapter that he gave as a lecture from this very pulpit, he talks about “the thin places” where those who are not too full of themselves can be attuned to a majesty and holiness that transcends ourselves. For some of us, nature itself is such a thin place, as the first verse of our earlier hymn underscored, but thin places can be found in all over, in meditation, in sacred liturgy, in music, the moral law, and, actually, in almost anything for one with an open heart.

In some translations the Hebrew is translated as "reverent" rather than "humble." This also connotes the capacity to respect something that is greater or more holy than you are. This capacity is not a self-deprecating meekness; it requires confidence to be willing to keep oneself in perspective, and even to lose oneself in a reality or perhaps even a project that transcends our everyday concerns about ourselves. In his book *Reverence: Renewing a Forgotten Virtue*, philosopher Paul Woodruff gives the example of four amateur musicians transcending their egos and losing their individualities while playing a Mozart quartet. This willingness to lose oneself he links to the capacity for awe and reverence. It need not involve amateurs; some of us have seen professional conductors—sometimes the epitome of "look at me" types--letting their egos recede well into the background as they show reverence for a Beethoven symphony. The willingness to show reverence to something greater than oneself

takes the same sort of self-confidence that we see in the humility to be teachable. Even the Enlightenment philosopher Immanuel Kant, not one noted for mushy sentimentalism, famously said that two things fill his mind with ever new and increasing wonder and awe—the starry skies above me and the moral law within me. Imagine if he knew about the big bang, dark energy, neutrinos, and the Higgs boson. Kant was reported to get teary eyed when he talked about his mother, so I think he could even admit that his heart and not just his mind is sometimes struck with awe, with reverence, and even with gratitude, heart felt gratitude. I hope he could *feel* it, as we say.

And this brings us to Job. If you remember the debate between Job and his three friends, the debate about whether Job is suffering for being unrighteous, humility is hardly the first word you would use to describe Job. In fact, we are told in Chapter 32 that “these three men ceased to answer Job, because he was righteous in his own eyes.” Of course, they may have been infected with what we now call “confirmation bias.” So listen to Job himself in Chapter 27: “As God lives, who has taken away my right, and the Almighty, who has made my soul bitter, as long as my breath is in me and the spirit of God is in my nostrils, my lips will not speak falsehood, and my tongue will not utter deceit. Far be it from me to say that you are right; until I die I will not put away my integrity from me. I hold fast my righteousness, and will not let it go; my heart does not reproach me for any of my days.” Talk about a hard heart! And given what God has allowed to happen to Job, we understand. We forgive him for being so sure of himself that he demands that God show up for a trial about how unjustly God is treating him.

Well, the story says that God shows up in a whirlwind. This is not an Elijah experience of a still, small voice. Job needed a Zeus type wind and

weather extravaganza to catch his attention. Now the story sometimes makes it look as if God merely pulls rank, asking Job for example, where he was at the creation and how he would do at running the universe. And Job is so overwhelmed that he admits that God has all the power. But something else happens; as with Moses, Job has some sort of direct experience of God's awesomeness. As he puts it, rather than just hearing about God, he sees God with his eyes. This is a metaphor, of course, and one with a somewhat ambiguous use in Scripture. Many biblical characters seemed to think that if they actually saw God they would die. Indeed, in Exodus 33, when Moses asks if he can see not just God's ways, but also God's glory, God tells Moses that no one can see God's face and live, which is why God puts Moses in the cleft of a rock and covers him with God's hand so that, as God's goodness or glory passes by, Moses can see only God's back. These are all metaphors, of course. What I make of them is that not even Moses can see God's true essence or understand the mystery of God's Being. But Moses can hear God as if God is speaking right next to him, and, our text says, Moses can thereby see the form of God (in Exodus, the back of God), which I think implies a uniquely intimate relationship with God and the sacred, in which he felt both the majesty and the holiness. And I infer from the text that Job must also have experienced this. The Hebrew text is quite ambiguous: Job could be described as either recanting his charge against God or as despising himself, and as repenting in dust and ashes or as admitting that the human condition is to be made of dust and to return to ashes. In any case, the experience must have been awesome. Popular culture tends to overuse that word, saying that something is awesome when what is meant is merely that it's pretty darn good. But something truly awesome is astonishing and also unsettling—its root is the Greek word for pain—it overwhelms and puts us in our place, thereby providing perspective.

Perhaps we don't experience this much; I certainly don't, not as I should. The world is too much with us, getting and spending, Nature and the sacred move us not. Besides some of us are academics who tend to be too much in our heads, carefully analyzing and wary of being smitten by mystery. But there is hope if we can just be open-minded and openhearted, and, whether by natural or cultivated temperament or by special epiphany, to have the confidence to see and to feel it when greatness transcends us.