

SERMON: October 21, 2018 The Strength of Humility
TEXT: Isaiah 53
SUBJECT: True strength.
THEME: God says that humility is more powerful than force and shows us by His own example.
PURPOSE: To lift up God's design for how we should act.
PICTURE: Plant growing through sidewalk.

What do you do when someone does something that goes against everything you have ever believed?

And worse yet, what if it comes from your pastor, the one that you trust is speaking for God, and yet you totally disagree with what he or she says?

This is the dilemma that we have in our scripture today, believe it or not. This is what was happening with Isaiah.

Now, it's kind of hard to catch the significance of this, because we have become accustomed to Isaiah's way of thinking. But at the time, I'm sure there were many people who either behind his back or to his face said, "Isaiah, we just don't think you're hearing from God anymore. What you're saying goes against our faith. We're going to either have to ask you to leave, or we will leave ourselves."

What was it that Isaiah said that upset people so much? What would cause them to turn against him and abandon their faith because they didn't like where it was going?

This idea of "humility".

We are used to it. We believe in it. We extol the virtues of humility – at least in lip service.

But do we really believe in it?



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I have a sermon that I am preparing for Superbowl Sunday on the Beatitudes – you know, “Blessed are the meek”, “Blessed are the poor in spirit”, and we’ll be asking the question – “Are the meek going to win the Superbowl?”

That’s not what we think of when we think of a championship team! If I were to ask you to list the characteristics of a great leader, we may have “humility” up there as one of the virtues, but rarely is it going to be the first one!

And I doubt that any of you, when you went in for a job interview, started out with, “I appreciate your consideration of me for this position. I just want to let you know my humility is what’s going to take this company to the next level!”

For most of the world’s history, HUMILITY was NOT considered to be a virtue! It was actually an embarrassment, something to be avoided. Humility was seen as weakness, as a sign of inferiority. If you were humble, it was because you really hadn’t done anything to be proud of.

Josephus, the great Jewish scholar, begins his writings with examples of how wonderful he was. Caesar Augustus wrote his own memorial to be etched into bronze plates, set up before his mausoleum and sent throughout the empire, listing the 35 key accomplishments during his reign. Politicians today and sports stars constantly remind us of how great they are, and how they deserve to be elected or given multi-year contracts.

In old society, if you were silent about your accomplishments that meant that you really didn’t think much of yourself! The ancient Greeks and Romans lifted up “philotimia”, which means “love of honor” or reputation. It was very important to them. You were considered a great person if you could point to the many works and accomplishments that you had achieved. It meant that you actually did something positive for society.

But “humilitas”? Not good. The root word for “humility” in Latin is “humus” – “of the earth”. It meant debased, crushed, insignificant. To be humiliated is to be what? To be brought low, to have your insignificance exposed for everyone to see.

Humility was not considered a virtue! You wanted to be great, to be seen, to be lifted up, not put down. If you didn’t, that meant that you were worthless. And while you might bow before the gods or before other great people, you would NEVER consider bowing before someone who was socially less than you, or even those who would be your equal!

It would actually be offensive to them, embarrassing. It was HUMILIATING.

When Isaiah first wrote and spoke these words about “the suffering servant”, it was completely incomprehensible to his people. How could greatness come from such

abasement? This servant Isaiah was speaking of – this doesn't sound like somebody we want to follow!

It's interesting, in my studies of other religions and faiths I wanted to understand Satanism, and it basically offers this:

Power.

Many people who turn to Satanism do so because they feel have so little control of their lives. They feel powerless. They may come from abusive families, or poverty, or something in their life that made them feel insignificant, so they turn to Satan whom they believe promises them power over the problems they face.

Of course, we believe that to be a false promise – the only power that Satan can offer is an illusion and he lies. But that's the contrast between Jesus and Satan. Satan says, "I'll give you whatever you want, if you will just follow me."

Jesus says, "Come, lay down your life, and serve with Me."

I wonder if Isaiah himself was surprised by what God was telling him – that weakness was the way that God was going to change the world. But whatever he thought about it, Isaiah spoke the words.

Who has believed our message

and to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed?

***² He grew up before him like a tender shoot,
and like a root out of dry ground.***

***He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him,
nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.***

***³ He was despised and rejected by mankind,
a man of suffering, and familiar with pain.***

***Like one from whom people hide their faces
he was despised, and we held him in low esteem.***

***⁴ Surely he took up our pain
and bore our suffering,
yet we considered him punished by God,
stricken by him, and afflicted.***

I can almost hear the surprise in Isaiah's voice as he spoke this – this is not what we expected!

But that's how God usually works – in subtle, powerful ways that we just don't see because we aren't looking in the right place.

One of my favorite quotes is from an unknown rabbi, who, when asked why more people don't find God today, replied, ***"Because most people aren't willing to look that low."***

This idea of humility, this concept of a god who comes down to earth and lives among us and lives for us – although we say we believe it, are we willing to accept it?

I found this in an article by John Dickson, taken from his book "Humilitas: Lost Key to Life, Love, and Leadership" –

Ancient Mediterranean cultures pursued honor and avoided shame at all costs. Honor was proof of merit, shame the proof of worthlessness. But what does this say about the crucified Jesus?

That was the question confronting the early Christians. Logically, they had just two options. Either Jesus was not as great as they had first thought, his crucifixion being evidence of his insignificance, or the notion of "greatness" itself had to be redefined to fit with the fact of his seemingly shameful end.

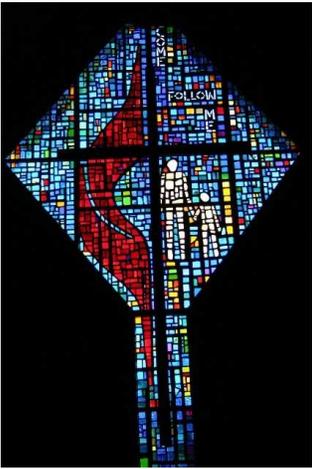
Paul talks about this when he says that "the cross is a stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to the Gentiles". Of the three forms of Roman execution – the cross, beheading, and burning alive – the cross was considered to be the most barbaric and humiliating way to die. The Jews would have been scandalized by the thought of God being humiliated in that way, and the Greeks would have said, "Your god died? Not much of a god then, was he?"

So Jesus crucified – shamed, humiliated, beaten, broken – either He wasn't really God, or our perception of who God is has to change.

We can truthfully point back to this event – Jesus dying on the cross – as a pivotal point in human history where everything changed. For us as believers it was the point of our salvation and the proof of God's love for us.

But for society as a whole, for the world's perception of greatness – this moment changed everything. ***If "greatness" does not mean getting everything you want here on this earth, what does it mean?***

With the crucifixion of Jesus, the world began asking this question. Even people who say that they don't believe in Jesus have had their worldview changed by this event. Up until this time, humility was seen as a detriment. Now, it has come to mean the greatest ideal that we have as humans – self-sacrifice not just for our friends, but for people that we don't even know.



There is a stained-glass window at our United Methodist Children's Home up near Deltona, Florida that has an adult and a child standing together before a cross.

<http://www.fumch.org/wp-content/gallery/main-campus/Chapel-Window-Copy.JPG>

And as you drive in the front gate, you see a sign that says,



<http://www.fumch.org/wp-content/gallery/main-campus/Entrance.JPG>

“None ever stand so tall as when they stoop to help a child.”

This was not the sentiment of ancient Rome. Children, the poor, women, the disabled – all were seen as expendable and not worth noticing.

But Jesus noticed us. Jesus changed everything. Jesus took the children into His arms and said to become like them. Jesus spoke to the woman at the well who wasn't even of His nationality and gave her words of life. Jesus touched the lepers, ate with sinners, and even ate with religious people!

What needs to change in my life because of this?

We have examples of this in our own culture – Tony Dungy, who was told that his style of leadership (not yelling at the players, treating them with respect and honor) would never work in professional football.

Rev. Dr. Fred Rogers, who was told that kids needed bright lights and fast-moving stories and animation, but who did things his way and taught many generations of us what it is to be strong but gentle.

I read recently about a business manager who, as part of the hiring process takes candidates out to lunch, and who makes his decision about whom he shall hire for his company based upon how they treat the wait staff. How you treat the people who serve you says a lot about who you really are.

This is really the point of this whole message – not that we hear some interesting history and a well-thought-out argument, but that we are changed. If we all leave here today acting and believing the same exact way as when we came in, I haven't really been your pastor today. ***My job is to comfort the afflicted and to afflict the comfortable. I am here to offer you both the peace and the challenge of Jesus.***

What have you heard today? I want to give you a moment to reflect, and to tell us all where you feel that God is challenging you.

(TAKE ANSWERS)

I guess at the end, I have to ask myself, ***“Do I live by the world's opinion of strength and power, or God's?”***

And if so, how does my life need to change?”