

First Presbyterian Church
1 Peter 5:1-7, “Humble Yourself”
by Pastor Matt Johnson, 5/21/2023

When it's hot and we've got a lot going on,
sometimes we just need it the sermon to come in two words.
If that's where you're at, then here's the sermon: Be humble.

Humble yourself.

This week it's that simple.

And yet ... I think we'll see that there is also a lot of depth beneath this simplicity.

Humility is not a difficult concept to get our heads around,
but it is a huge challenge to embody humility
across our lives from day to day.

You can see this through the simple fact that few people know
how to talk about humility or being humble.

For instance, LeBron James. I love LeBron.
I think he's the best all-around basketball player ever.
He's certainly one of the most intelligent basketball players ever.

On February 8th of this year, James passed Kareem Abdul-Jabbar
to become the most prolific scorer in the history of professional basketball.
Upon reaching the pinnacle of a mountain that most people thought
was impossible to summit, LeBron said that it was, and I quote,
“very humbling.”

Okay...I don't think that word means what he thinks it means.
This happens all across the celebrity world.
Win an Oscar? “I'm humbled.”
Get paid hundreds of millions of dollars to play a game?
“It's humbling.”

Have your name mentioned among the greatest
to ever do something in human history?

“It humbles you to hear that.”

Does it, though? You see, we’re so bad at humility in our culture
that we use the word to mean the exact opposite of what it really means.

I think the word that all these people are searching for is “honored.”
“It’s an honor. I’m honored.”

“I’m in shock to be lifted so high in the annals of history.”

“It’s hard to believe that my name
is above every other name in my profession.”

These folks are actually being glorified, exalted, and highly praised.
That’s the *opposite* of being humbled!

I was the tallest kid at my Middle School and couldn’t make the basketball team,
even though I tried out three years in a row. It was humbling.

When I tell my wife Sonja I don’t need a list at the grocery store
and come back without the most important thing she asked for,
that’s humbling.

A team from our church went to El Salvador in March.
In one week we realized that the tiny Reformed Calvinist Church
of El Salvador is having an incredible impact
while operating with far fewer resources than we have here.
We were humbled.

Humility is encountered when we go unnoticed, when we make room for others,
when our accomplishments are not the focus of attention,
when we make much of the qualities we see in other people.

Sometimes life brings us to our knees against our will – we are humiliated.
It’s not fun. If the wealthiest country on earth defaults on its debt,
that would be humiliating.

Other times we voluntarily take on the quality of humility
– we humble ourselves. It's ... certainly not easy,
but the experience is different from being humiliated.

The difference comes in who initiates the humbling:
is it an internal choice to relinquish personal acclaim and glory,
or is it an external event that brings a prideful person down low?

In today's passage, Peter, writing to fragile communities of faith
who are suffering and fearful of their neighbors,
encourages them to resist the impulse to exalt themselves.
Better, he suggests, that they take on the kind of humility demonstrated by Jesus.

He begins in vv. 1-5 with a word to the elders.

v. 2 Be shepherds of God's flock under your care, watching over them.

The idea here is that the elders (including Peter) are co-elders of the community
sharing leadership in the church which belongs to Jesus, not to them.

Passages like this are behind our approach to Presbyterian polity,
which is centered on the concept of elder led ministry.

I am an elder, but I am not the only elder
and I'm not the only shepherd of the flock.

Raise your hand if you are currently serving as an elder.

Now raise your hand if you have ever been ordained as an elder.

We have a strong community of leaders who Peter would
direct this message to if he were writing to our church today.

As I mentioned earlier, these groups are somewhat fragile
and have endured hardships. Leading a community like that
brings unique challenges and unique pitfalls.

So there are some leadership concerns that Peter wants to address.

Essentially, this is like a primer in church leadership principles
from the first century. Each one has a positive and a negative element.

1) v. 2 Don't lead because you think you have to.
Do lead because you are willing with God's help.

Leadership that comes with the burden of an onerous duty brings burn-out,
resentment, and other unwanted byproducts.

We don't just look for warm bodies to fill seats at a board meeting.
The challenges of leading the church today require heart,
passion, discernment, and faith.

When we lead because we are willing to serve as God desires,
then service brings vitality, purpose, and growth
to our own lives and to others,
and God is honored through our service.

2) Don't lead for the sake of dishonest gain, but be eager to serve.

This is about humility. Grifters think they can take advantage
of a wounded group of outsiders and squeeze them for all their worth.
But true elders of God's flock are humble.

Rather than trying to get as much as they can from the people,
they seek to give as much of themselves as they can.

3) Don't lead because you want to control the situation.
Do lead by example.

A controlling or agenda-driven approach to church leadership
creates conflicts among people and groups.

Elders aren't the ones who tell others the way it's going to be.
They are the ones who show others the way Jesus is leading.

So many church scandals from ancient times to modern times
have come from pastors and elders who want to "lord it over" others.
Maybe they can't be big-shots with their friends, family,
or co-workers, but they're going to be big-shots at church.

For elders who recognize that they serve as sub-shepherds to God,
who lead willingly, and who lead by example,
Peter says in v. 4 that when the Chief Shepherd appears,
they will receive a crown of glory that will never fade.

This shouldn't be taken literally, but it should be taken seriously.
God sees those who serve in Christlike ways,
God knows the suffering that comes from confronting
the forces of the world,
and God will honor those who have served faithfully.
That's you, elders! That's you, deacons! That's you, congregation!
God is crowning on you, not frowning on you.

in v. 5, which closes out this first section,
Peter teaches that (assuming the elders are leading in the healthy ways
he has discussed)
the younger church members should submit to their leadership.

Now, "submit" is not a word we like to use in relationships today.
But the way our church runs actually depends on submission to each other.
The congregation elects elders and then submits to their leadership
because the currently serving group of elders
(which we call the session)
makes most of the decisions about
our life and ministry together.

So submission doesn't mean subservience. It doesn't mean being less-than.
It means trusting and honoring those whom God has called to be an elder
– whether they are older than you or not!

v. 5 ends with the central statement of the entire passage:
**"All of you clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, because
(as it says in Proverbs 3:34) 'God opposes the proud
but shows favor to the humble.'"**

When I interact with anyone at church, I need to ask myself:

Do I want to be thought highly of? Is this about my agenda?

Am I trying to get extra attention here?

If so, I need to put on my humility jacket.

Put on humility like a basic garment of clothing and walk around with it.

Let it be something that, like clothing, sends a message without speaking.

V. 6 takes this idea further:

**“Humble yourselves, therefore, under God’s mighty hand,
and God will lift you up in due time.”**

This reminds me of the party advice that Jesus gave to his friends.

When you go to a party don’t sit at the best seat. Sit at the worst seat.

Then when the person throwing the party sees you way down there
they will say,

“Hey, don’t sit down there – come up here by me!”

We humble our selves under God’s mighty hand

because we know that our humility creates a conduit to God’s strength.

We look less powerful to others but when we willingly take on
a humble attitude, God’s power is more vibrantly available
to us than ever. Why?

Because when you *choose* to be humble you are invincible.

Nobody can take you down, you’ve already humbled yourself!

And when that is your goal, then you have real freedom.

You begin to see the world as God does and you don’t
get caught in the traps that others are caught in

because you don’t pursue

the same things that others pursue.

That’s power.

And when the time is right—which may be today, tomorrow,

or when we are united with Christ in heaven—God will raise us up.

In due time our humility will translate into honor.

Finally in v. 7, **“Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.”**

What a message of grace. Do you need to hear that? I need to hear that.
Our lives are so full of anxiety. We're so worried about the climate,
the debt ceiling, international conflicts, our health, our families,
our kids, our jobs, our finances, our church, our society...
These things take up residence in our minds and in our bodies.
Sometimes anxiety causes my eyes to twitch. My leg vibrates.
My body is sending messages, "Things aren't so good right now!"

Anxiety can be good. It makes us focused, it heightens our awareness,
it marshals our energy to address an imminent threat.
We would never make it without any anxiety at all.
But we weren't made for chronic anxiety.
And the internet and all our news feeds and our virtually connected lives
provides that world's anxiety architects constant access
to our minds and bodies.
You don't have to let them in—not all the time.
Don't give them access to you that they don't deserve.
Instead, make space in your life apart from their influence so you can
cast your anxiety on God because God really cares for you.

This is actually humility put into practice.
In humility admit that you aren't going to solve the world's problems.
Admit that you aren't responsible for what someone else
in your family or workplace or church
is trying to get you to feel responsible for.
Admit that you are just a human being,
a creature who needs rest and boundaries and love.
You can only do so much each day and then you are done.
Anything beyond that just needs to be given to God.

Humility is more than an internal attitude.
It is a thoughtful, intentional way of being in relationship with others.

Friends, open your hearts to God. Let us humble ourselves in the sight of the Lord,
and cast our anxiety upon our Creator.