

Sermon on Romans 12:9-21 on the 11<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost August 27/28, 2011  
at CVLC

by Pastor Stefan Potuznik

Title: "Humilitas"

Theme: Humilitas is a virtue that Jesus taught in his life. His life was a visual example of what it means to live a humble life. St. Paul challenges his readers to live a humble life, when we outdo one another in showing honor, when we contribute to the needy, and when we extend hospitality to the stranger.

Mama Maggie, a Coptic Christian nun from Cairo, Egypt, devoted her life to helping orphans and poor children in Cairo. She lives a humble life.

God wants to touch us with humilitas and wants us to touch others as well.

Dear Congregation, often, depending on the person, there is something about one that draws people to follow that individual and be inspired. What is often this "something?" People are inspired by others whose messages and actions go together. In particular, people trust a leader at work, at school, in the healthcare profession, in politics or in the religious realm when they sense humility in that person.

St. Paul writes in his letter to the congregation in Rome about what it means to live a humble life and be an example of Christ. He says, "*Love genuinely, hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good, love one another with mutual affection, outdo one another in showing honor, rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer, contribute to the needs of the saints and extend hospitality to the strangers.*"

With all of his examples, he is saying, "Don't consider yourself first, but be humble and see the other first."

Today, I would like to take a closer look at what this *humilitas* is all about. We'll see how Jesus lived a humble life, how a woman in Cairo, Egypt is living a humble life, and what steps we can take to try and live humbly. Being humble is a virtue that will help us in our journey of living a Christian life, a life that is filled with purpose and meaning, a life that inspires other to live the same.

During the last Global Leadership conference at Willow Creek Community Church, I found myself very intrigued when I listened to Dr. John Dickson, an ancient history professor and senior minister at an Anglican church in Sydney, Australia. He just wrote a book on humility. After his talk, I immediately got up and bought the book. Let me share some of Dr. Dickson's insights on this important topic. He defines humility as "*the willingness to hold power in service of others. In fact,*" he says, "*humility is about redirecting your powers, whether they be physical, intellectual, financial, or structural, for the sake of others.*"

There are many examples of people who lived their lives in just that way. John Dickson gives this example, "Three young men hopped on a bus in Detroit in the 1930's and tried to pick a fight with a lone man sitting at the back of the bus. They insulted him. He didn't respond. They turned up the heat of the insults. He said nothing. Eventually, the stranger stood up. He was bigger than they had estimated from his seat position – much bigger. He reached into his pocket, handed them his business card and walked off the bus and went on his way. As the bus drove on, the young men gathered around the card to read the words: "Joe Louis, Boxer." They had just tried to pick a fight with the man who would be Heavyweight Boxing Champion of the World from 1937-1949, the number one boxer of all time.

Here was a man of immense power and skill, capable of defending his honor with a single, devastating blow. Yet, he chose to forgo his status and hold his power for others – in this case, for some very fortunate young men.

Jesus did not fight back when he was verbally attacked, arrested, beaten and later, crucified. It is interesting to notice that Jesus' crucifixion became the most humble expression of his life. Crucifixion changed the way in which people thought about humility.

The ancient world was an honor-shame society. Humility before God, or a judge, king or priest was appropriate, but lowering yourself before someone of equal or lesser status was not fitting. One of the first examples of a person who taught humility to others with equal or lower status is found in 200 BC. The Jerusalem sage, Rabbi Yeshua Ben Sira, told his students, "*Humble your head before the great. Incline your ear to the poor and return their greeting in humility.*" (Sirach 4:7-8)

In an honor-shame society, crucifixion was seen as a most shameful event. But for the early Christians, crucifixion became the most powerful sign that greatness could express itself in humility, that one could choose the noble choice when you'd decide to lower yourself for the sake of others.

Around thirty years after Jesus' crucifixion, a follower named Paul wrote these remarkable words to the Roman colony in Philippi in northern Greece. Philip. 2:3-8

*"Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. [4] Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. [5] Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, [6] who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, [7] but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, [8] he humbled himself*

*and became obedient to the point of death-- even death on a cross.”*

This early text did something that had never before been done. It connected God’s ultimate greatness with crucifixion, and thus changed the meaning of honor. For the Christians in that time, the greatest man who ever lived chose to do good for others above serving himself. That meant that greatness was then connected to humble service. The shameful place of the cross was a new place of honor, the low point became the high point.

During our recent stay in Austria, we took a gondola ride to the top of a high mountain called “Hohe Salve.” When we arrived at the summit, I noticed a small chapel with a cross on top. The chapel was filled with people singing “Grosser Gott wir loben Dich” (English: “Holy God, We Praise Your Name”). I learned that this chapel is the highest wedding chapel in the Austrian Alps. On many mountaintops in Austria, you find erected a cross. Also, at the highest point in the world, on Mount Everest, when Sir Edmund Hillary first reached this place in 1953, he put up a cross. When we are on top of a mountain, feeling like we are on top of the world, looking down at everything that looks very small, we are immediately made humble in the power and greatness of God’s creation. The cross reminds us of our own humility and then, of God’s humility towards us.

Theologically, we Lutherans are Christians of the *cross* of Christ, and not of the glory of God’s reign. The glory comes first from the messy, moving event of the cross, when God took on our sin and became equal with us, humbling Godself for us, so that we could be forgiven and made new. God loves us so much that God sent his only Son to go so low, so that we would never have to go where God hasn’t already gone – to the depths of the cross. Jesus humbled himself, so we could live in a new way.

Whenever we see or come in contact with a person who is genuinely humble, we are drawn to that person and we would like to be a little bit like that person.

I just had this experience and was deeply moved when I saw and listened to Mama Maggie Gobran from Cairo, Egypt. When Mama Maggie entered the stage of the Global Leadership Conference at Willow Creek three weeks ago, there was total silence in the large audience of 8000 plus attendees. The silence was long; and then all of a sudden people stood up and gave the woman, dressed in a white robe, a standing ovation.

I was one of them, and I was even more touched when I heard her share her story. She told us that she grew up in an upper class family in Cairo. Her father was a physician, and she lived a sheltered life in Cairo's Coptic Orthodox Christian community. She grew up, shielded from the realities of central Cairo's squalid slums.

As an adult, Maggie became a successful professional, first on the management team of a marketing firm and later as a university professor of computer science. As she and her husband raised their own two children, Maggie's vision of "motherhood" began to grow as she dreamt of reaching out to children in need. A role model in her life was her aunt, who instilled in her a humble and servant spirit. Maggie first experienced Cairo's garbage slums through an annual Easter outreach that was aimed at distributing food and clothing to families. Maggie was gripped by the despair she saw and haunted by the children's hunger for love, acceptance, and value in society.

Her heart was pierced by God's Spirit, and Maggie's vision for Stephen's Children Ministry began with a prayer for other committed Egyptian Christians to join her in meeting both the short-term and long-term needs of the impoverished families in

Cairo's slums. Mama Maggie's humble spirit and loving heart allowed her to build close bonds with children and discover ways to meet their underlying needs. Her sacrificial leadership has now guided Stephen's Children Ministry for over 20 years and helped reach over 25,000 families with Christ's love and compassion.

Reflecting on the lives the children lead, Maggie Gobran said that most days it is she, herself, who is humbled and taught by them. "Many times I have seen children break a piece of bread and cut it into pieces to share. I am learning from them. I have also learned how to be grateful to God: they have so little, yet are so thankful for the very little they have. They can really be happy from deep inside when they share."

When Mama Maggie spoke, I felt pure holiness exude from her. The room was changed. She was filled with compassion and humility to help the children of Cairo to live a better life. After she gave her talk, she said, "Wherever I go, I bless the ground where I am standing, so that this place can be a blessing for others." She went on her knees and kissed the ground. Again, there was holy silence in the room, and after quite a long time the audience got up and gave another long standing ovation. She left the audience with these words, "If you want to be a hero, live a humble life."

Jesus told his disciples, *"If you want to be my followers, you need to deny yourselves and take up your cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their lives for my sake will find it."* Basically, Jesus is telling them to live a humble life by serving others who are in need.

I would like to share a few steps that may help all of us to live humble lives. I learned these steps from the book "Humilitas" by John Dickson.

1. Step: We are shaped by what we love

If we meet a person who is humble - a friend, a relative, a person we look up to, we are intrigued and we would like to be like this person. When I met my wife, Melanie, I was so intrigued by her welcome and friendliness. Her openness for new ideas has helped me over the years to be more open, too. I continually learn from her what flexibility is all about. I am shaped by what I love.

## 2. Step: Reflect on the lives of the humble

Look for people who hold their power for the good of others before themselves. Watch them closely, talk to them about their decisions and try to learn from them and emulate them, if possible. A person I deeply admire for humbleness and leadership is Nelson Mandela, former South African reformer, who became a prisoner for close to thirty years. Following his prison time, he became president of a new democratic South African Republic without apartheid. The closest I got to this legend was ten years ago, when I was on a mission trip in South Africa and we drove by his residence. I learned from Nelson Mandela how critical it is to reach out to people who have different opinions than I do and befriend my enemies.

## 3. Step: Just act humbly

Not only thoughts inspire actions, but actions also influence how we think. This week, I brought two of my boys to their first day of school. Both were excited to go, and half an hour before school started, Marek was sitting on the front porch steps, ready to go with his backpack. He loves going to school and learning new things. He waited patiently for me to take him. Going to school, meeting a new teacher and new students is a humbling experience. I felt he realized there is something bigger out there that he was ready humble to embrace.

There are many moments in the day when we are invited to act humbly. There are moments when we can choose to be proud and focus on ourselves, or, rather, choose to look out for the interests of others. But, each moment in our lives God

gives us amazing grace. God is more concerned about us than to be God who is above us, judging us. God acts humble as God becomes one of us, experiencing life as we do and is always focused on loving us.

I pray that each one of us is touched by God's humility, so that we can touch others with humility and love. Jesus said, "*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.*" (Matt 11:29)

Let us pray, Amazing God, you made the cross to a sign of humility, a sign of your great love for us. Your humble spirit changed the world and continues to change people. Help us not to act out of pride, but rather to be filled with humble hearts that see the need of others first. Amen.