

**Prayer of the Day:** You are God of birds singing sweetly in trees as we walk out the door this morning, and of the One who hung upon the tree. How great you are! And here we are taking our first steps through Lent knowing how much we need you. Astound us again, dear God, with the strength of Jesus' humble faithfulness, even amid temptations. Take us as we are and send us to walk with you in lowly paths of service, in the ever closer and dearer company of friends, in the name of Christ, our Lord. Amen.

*The Strength of Humility*

Luke 4:1-13; Philippians 1:27-2:5

Seth E. Weeldreyer

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I started seminary with lots of questions and couldn't wait to study big theological words I'd never heard of! I thought: let me at this faith thing. Let me get it under control. Then I'll go out there and change the world! I'd been successful through the previous nineteen years of life spent in the classroom. Well, there was Calc II in college where I got distracted by a few(!) other extra-curricular involvements ... and on the final exam I earned an 88 out of 200, including 40 points of possible extra credit! ☺ Still, seminary started confidently. I handled Hebrew with gusto, side by side at the top with my fast friend and competitor, Scott.

Then I met Elizabeth Achtemeier, may she rest in peace without the scowl that struck fear into green, sappy seminarians like me! Green ... like I'd still never read at least half the Bible. I'd begun Genesis several times; hit all the thou shalt and shalt nots of Leviticus; skipped forward a bit to Joshua, which almost made me give it up entirely. In one last gasp of hope I jumped on to Jesus! But if you're going to be a Presbyterian minister there are a series of trials called ordination exams. It begins with the Bible Content Exam – really a kind of trivia survey of who said what quote and other obscure details amid a few well known stories. Well, Dr. Achtemeier taught an elective class first semester affectionately called “Betty's Bible Blitz.” In grudging acceptance of my ignorance I thought it might be practically useful. Little did I realize! The first test from Adam, Eve and Abraham through Moses and Leviticus ... I *nearly* passed. Then histories, prophets, psalms ... as we finished the Hebrew Scriptures just before Thanksgiving I was failing miserably; probably the bottom of the class. I stayed after class one day in that same room of Hebrew glory ... now thoroughly humbled, wanting to slink out the door to avoid my doom. Maybe that's about when I really began to believe there is a God! That maybe dear old Betty wasn't as bad and maybe I'm not as great as I thought! A slice of humble pie every now and then can be nourishing to the human spirit. ☺

I spent my Thanksgiving break on the Outer Banks holed up in our bedroom with St. Paul and his letters ... “if there is any encouragement, indeed!” Actually I'm not sure it was mathematically possible for me to pass. But by the grace of God in Betty and a grading system including some term like “barely-scrape-through-by-the-hair-of-your-chinny-chin” (do you see the little bare spot in my beard?) I passed that class ... and yes, even the Bible Content Exam. Even better I learned a bit about my weakness and true strength of relationship with God and others ... that may just be what the Bible is all about!

I guess maybe it's like Jesus' ordination exam. He's about to begin his ministry, according to Luke "If you are the Son of God ... if you do know so much about God and God knows you so well," the devil taunts Jesus time and again on his little ordeal in the wilderness for forty days. It's not really a question of cognitive knowledge, is it? Of course, the story is told so we get a clue before Jesus starts healing, preaching and associating with all kinds of people. *Even more*, so that we'll know God; we'll trust, serve, give our lives to God as Jesus does.

Now the critical thing to understand about the ways Jesus gets tempted is not whether they are inherently good or bad things to do. We're not talking about trials and temptations of a certain golf player, one of the most recognizable faces on the planet who seems to be wandering in the Woods-y wilderness right now. "I thought I could get away with whatever I wanted to," Tiger admitted. "I felt that I had worked hard my entire life and deserved to enjoy all the temptations around me.... Thanks to money and fame, I didn't have to go far to find them." And maybe that's all we should say about another human's struggles, before we recognize some of those same temptations perhaps to a different devilish degree all around and inside us. In the end, Tiger is right, of course. Our faithfulness to a beloved and to God ultimately "will not come in the form of words. It will come from [our] behavior over time."

No, Jesus' dance with the devil is not a matter of whether his tempting behaviors are inherently bad. *In fact, each one foreshadows some faithful behavior he shows in the future.* With a miracle of loaves he feeds thousands. With all he says and does he constantly tries to have the glory and authority of God's reign shape all the kingdoms of this world. And at the pinnacle of the cross he gives his life into the hands of God's angels as much as Roman soldiers.

Yes, every one of Jesus' temptations can be something good. Friends, the question in this story is all about motivation, the orientation of our hearts. *It is a lesson in pride and humility.* If you are so great, the devil says, prove it! Demonstrate it! Do all these things to bask in your glory! The word pride, in the Bible, you see, means to claim for ourselves any honor and glory that are due to God. We trust our own power or some other that serves our self-centered interest, rather than trusting in God and God's purposes. That's how we separate from God.

We've started our forty day journey through Lent, through the late winter wilderness. Ever with hope of resurrection, we think about our separation from God and others. In these weeks my sermons will be around the so-called "seven deadly sins." Or really, better focused, I prefer the lively virtues at the heart of loving God and others. You see, I'm not really into that medieval damnation stuff. As we journey through the weakened, vulnerable, famished parts of our life like Jesus in the wilderness, I want to know: how do we fill up with God's love? The first virtue is humility.

Now friends, humility is not low self-esteem, shame or humiliation, some powerless rug-like existence that lets other people trample us at will. It's not even really modesty like depreciating our bridge-playing abilities; though I suppose there's some goodness in that. *In fact, friends, quite the opposite of weakness, humility is a kind of strength greater than all else in this life and world.* And that strength may lead us into situations that are lowly or life

threatening ... but the critical point is that it's our choice, our motive, our faithfulness to God in relationship with others that gets us there.

That strength seeps into our mental pores and fills our hearts when we trust in God more than self or anything else. That's the bond the devil tries to break inside Jesus. And in response to each temptation, Jesus reaffirms his dependence on God. "One does not live ..." he says. And every good Jew listening to Luke could finish that Bible content exam quote "... not by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord." When I imagine Jesus as Luke portrays him in this text, I see a person totally at peace. It's the kind of peace, as Richard Rohr describes, where we have experienced the vast, beautiful, scary, holy mystery of life and eternity. When through forest glades we've wandered and seen the stars and heard the rolling thunder ... And amidst all the uncertain realities surrounding us, penetrating us, we feel the echo of God's word Jesus heard just before he went into the wilderness: "*You are my beloved. I am as devotedly pleased with you as I am with everything else I created and called good since the beginning.*" When we give our hearts to that echo of eternal love, we have the strength to give up clinging to our accomplishments; or our fear when life seems beyond our ability to control. *The strength of humility begins when we place our heart in the hand of God.*

*And humility culminates when we reach out a hand of concern for others more than ourselves.* We don't look for accolades or special privileges, nor shy away from any deed of service too lowly, like washing feet. We follow the Way of the One who touched lepers, ate with outcasts, and ultimately rode a donkey into Jerusalem on the path to the cross. Paul knows something about that pathway, because he's on it as he writes from prison. If there is any encouragement we might gain in Christ, Paul says, it will come through the unity of humility. More than any special attribute, talent, intellect, or competition to be first in our class, we depend on an attitude of compassionate unconditional love. Do not be motivated, Paul urges, by selfish ambition or conceit – literally "empty glory." Work for the betterment of others ... be as pleased when they play their cards well as when you or I do ourselves.

Now that's pretty hard work for all of us, isn't it friends?! So what's the difference in being with someone who's humble or not? I asked him. Amid pomposity or even subtle pride, overwhelmed with someone else's knowledge or prestige or money we can feel disempowered, deflated, belittled. All the energy of conversation goes to making the other person feel good. But in the presence of someone who is humble, we feel at ease, inflated and empowered. Isn't it often when people – when you and I – feel less secure about ourselves that we feel need to talk about our accomplishments, grand experiences, talents and abilities? And when we're most secure with who we are, regardless of the circumstances that surround us, we can be at peace. We know our place ... most of all in God's grace.

I'd just finished watching *Slumdog Millionaire* late Friday night to prepare for tonight. It's a heart-wrenching and heart-warming story set against tempting glitz and ugliness of "success" as defined by society. And just before going to bed I checked one more time for responses to my blog posting.

"This past year, I've learned a great deal about myself," she writes. "I'd like to believe I have become more humble. In the past, I pretty much counted on myself for feelings of worth ...

achieved by the “house”, the “job”, all those good things that I did for myself. . . things that people could look at and grade me as being successful; a good person. With all that gone, I am glad God has been there to pick me up, dust me off, and make me see that those things do not make me worthy or worthwhile. I am worthwhile because He thinks so; because He loves me.

“That knowledge allows me to hold my head up in a crowd of people who still establish a person’s success and worth by their job or their house or their clothes. Yes, I feel stronger without all those things because I KNOW my worth is established by God. And I do feel unencumbered to do more for others because I don’t have so much that I feel I need to attend to first.

“When we’re in the presence of people who are more self-centered, it does tend to suck the life out of us . . . because we find ourselves judging ourselves by their standards. And we know, I know that I’m not measuring up. It is humility that puts the life back into me. It saves me from depression or anger and allows me to still be civil and smile and care about others. It is the calm and the peace of knowing that those other things, those things that used to get us worked up into such a tizzy, do not matter.”

Friends, true humility is something we all struggle with. Kids at 335 North Mulberry have been known to come home to share a good grade, some accomplishment or otherwise hear their parents say you know what . . . you’re smart, beautiful, talented, etc. etc. And they respond with a haughty humpf: “I know!” Suzanne says she knows where they get it! 😊

I pray we all may know God something like Jesus did as intimately as children. Humility begins with trust in God more than self, more than any trials or temptations, good or bad. A life of humility goes on and on to eternity as we serve concerns of others more than our selves. In this season and all the length of our days, dear friends, live with the strength of humility.

Thanks be to God. Amen.