

“A Sense of Perspective”

Luke 6.37–41

The Rev. Hal Chorprenning, Plymouth Cong'l UCC, 1 May 2005

It's **not** about all about me.

That's hard for us to believe sometimes. What's your first reaction when you read or see something? When you see picture of a white sand beach with crystal blue water and a warm, inviting sun, do you think, “Gee, *I'd* like to go there!” Or when you are at a restaurant and see a really appetizing dessert go by on a waiter's tray, do you think, “*I'll* have one of those.” Of course you do; we're conditioned to think that way. We don't necessarily see its intrinsic beauty or appreciate someone else's pleasure.

When Jean and I were in the Gambia in West Africa a dozen years ago, one of the most striking things was giving a few fun-size candy bars to some kids, who were thrilled. And what do you think the kids did with them? Did they rip right in and devour them, as most American kids would have done? No. They brought the candy to their friends and divided the tiny candy bars with their friends. Those kids haven't been raised with the mindset that “It's all about me.”

It's difficult in our culture not to feel entitled. We might feel entitled to a good education for our kids, to quality healthcare, to cheap gasoline, to low taxes, to good roads, to a certain standard of living. (None of those is necessarily a bad thing, by the way!) But the feeling of entitlement leads to form of arrogance that is deeply engrained in our culture.

And through our culture's apprehension of technology (again, not a bad thing, in itself), we also have been lulled into a sense that we are in instantaneous control. After all, I can pick up my cell phone and dial direct a friend in England, or I can get online and do my banking. If I want to be sure that my flight is going to be on time, I can have United Airlines send a text message to my cell phone with updated information, and if I want to get the latest weather satellite image, all I have to do is go to weather.com. If my cholesterol and blood pressure are high, I can pop a couple of pills to take care of it. And if I want to be successful in life, all I have to do is say the Prayer of Jabez. If I want to ensure that I have a happy afterlife, all I have to do is repeat the magic words, “I accept Jesus Christ as my personal Lord and savior.” *I am fully in control.*

Until something bad happens. Something that shakes me to the very foundation of my being. Something like the death of a child. Something like 9/11. And then, all of a sudden, I realize the truth of the situation: *I am not in control, and it's not all about me.*

This is nothing new; remember the words of Ecclesiastes: “Vanity of vanities, says the Teacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity. What do people gain from all the toil at which they toil under the sun? A generation goes, and a generation comes, but the earth remains forever.”¹ *I am not in control, and it's not all about me.*

As the wise Hasidic scholar, Abraham Joshua Heschel, once remarked: “If you want to make God laugh, tell him your plan.”

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When “bad things happen to good people,” especially when bad things happen to **us**, we begin to see the glimmers of humility. That we are not the masters of the universe. That we are not ultimately in control. And that sense of humility gives rise to a new sense of perspective.

Humility is a virtue seldom preached about in Protestant churches. (And I'm not talking about the kind of humility that requires us to wear hair shirts or flagellate ourselves,

¹ Ecclesiastes 1.2–4

nor the kind of humility that says, “I’m not worthy,” nor the kind of humility that has us sell ourselves or our abilities short.) When was the last time you heard a televangelist preach on the Christian virtue of humility? When was the last time you heard a UCC minister expound on the topic? The truth of the matter is that we are all a product of our culture, and our society is one of the least humble the world has seen since the height of the Roman Empire.

Humility is having a deep and true sense of yourself in relationship to God, to creation, and to humanity. And it is closely related to reverence, another forgotten virtue. In his book, *Reverence*, Paul Woodruff claims that “Reverence is the well-developed capacity to have feelings of awe, respect, and shame when these are the right feelings to have.”²

The opposite of humility is not pride, nor is it power. A balanced sense of pride can encourage one to keep striving further and take risks and push the envelope (but one must have a sense of perspective). Power used appropriately can be a magnificently positive force in the world (but it must be used with a sense of perspective).

No, the opposite of humility is arrogance. “To forget that you are only human, to think you can act like a god – this is the opposite of reverence,” says Woodruff. “Ancient Greeks thought that tyranny was the height of irreverence, and they gave the famous name *hubris* to the crimes of tyrants.”³ (I daresay that our nation has demonstrated its *hubris* in recent years.)

Humility and reverence help put our lives in truer perspective: not that we are worms who ought to grovel, nor that we are entitled to all we want. Rather, these virtues help us to see that all we have been given – life, health, wealth, love, family, friends, church, community – all of this is given to us not through our own merit, but by the grace of God.



And we must acknowledge that we, all of us, have an amazingly long two-by-four protruding from our eye! We are imperfect beings, so how can we possibly have the arrogance to judge others on issues that are still blinding us? That is *hubris*.

It takes a healthy sense of humility to recognize that there is, in fact, a timber in our eye and then to ask help for its removal. (I have to say that I loved Ken Salazar’s Freudian slip this week, claiming that Focus on the Family was the Antichrist, when he meant to say, “unchristian.” I wonder if Dr. Dobson and his ilk have ever reflected on their own sin before judging those of us who are not of the same sexual orientation he is.)

I always think of the Shaker song, “Simple Gifts,” and finding “ourselves in the place just right.” How do we know when we are in that place? How do we know our own true place in the universe? How do we understand when we are neither aggrandizing ourselves nor selling ourselves short? I wish there was a simple answer to that question.

Perhaps one way is to maintain a healthy attitude of self-awareness in the context of those around you. Ask if you are always watching out for number one. Are you putting your own perceived interests ahead of the best interests of your spouse? your family? your community? God’s world? God’s intention for you as a person? The next time you find yourself wondering if you are being appropriately self-aware, ask yourself if it’s really all about you.

I love the verse from that great hymn by Richard Gillard, in which he writes, “We are pilgrims on the journey, we are travelers on the road; We are here to help each other go

² Paul Woodruff, *Reverence: Renewing a Forgotten Virtue*, (NY: Oxford, 2001), p. 8.

³ *ibid.*, p. 4

the mile and bear the load.”⁴ That line speaks volumes about the Christian life, about community, about humility, and about reverence.

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It would be a mistake to think that humility and reverence are solely personal virtues. Think of this:

Spiritual humility and reverence can mean seeing that there is a force greater than we are that makes all things – including us – possible. And that God is not a cosmic vending machine who responds to all our wants.

Environmental humility and reverence can mean seeing that God’s creation is not here for us to rape and pillage, but rather to preserve.

Political humility and reverence can mean reacting to a catastrophe like 9/11 not by going on the attack, but by trying to understand the root causes behind the atrocities and then solving the underlying issues, and seeing ourselves as a part of God’s family on this planet.

Social humility and reverence can mean seeing all persons as God’s beloved, that they are our sisters and brothers, even if they are trying to immigrate into our country illegally.

Relational humility and reverence can mean sometimes putting the needs of another person before our own interests.

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Last week, I heard Karen Armstrong quote the wisdom of Rabbi Heschel, who said that *when we put ourselves at the opposite pole of ego, we are in a place where God is*.

In closing, let me leave you with the words Psalm 8, which help us see ourselves in perspective:

“When I behold your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and stars that you set in place, what are we that you are mindful of us, that you have taken note of us? You have made us a little less than divine and crowned us with glory and honor.”⁵ Amen.

⁴ NCH 539, “Won’t You Let Me Be Your Servant?”

⁵ Psalm 8. 4–6 (My translation, using first-person plural pronouns.)