

Philippians 2:1-13 "The Temptation of Hubris"

Before I discovered the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Easter used to sneak up on me. Of course I knew Easter was coming because the stores stocked up on Cadbury chocolate eggs, jelly beans, Easter baskets and stuffed bunnies. But as far as any of the churches I attended, we really didn't have any build-up to Easter like we do in the Disciples. We'd just be moving along business as usual and then BOOM! It was Easter. So I appreciate churches like ours who like creating anticipation. I mean, we do it for Christmas, right? Why not for Easter too? A lot of Christians believe Easter is more important than Christmas anyway. Sure, Christmas celebrates the *birth* of *Jesus*, but Easter celebrates the *Risen Christ*! So why not have some build-up? Why not take time to do some self-examination along the way? That's what Lent is all about. It's a time where we slow down the pace a little and do some serious reflecting on what it means to follow the path of Jesus. This season we've been looking into the temptations Jesus experienced throughout his ministry and how they are similar to the ones we face too.

I like Palm Sunday because it's a day where we can lighten up a little before we go into Holy Week where everything is all about betrayal and death and trials and crucifixions and sadness. It's a Sunday where we can wave palms and sing happy songs. This is where we get to gather at the gates of Jerusalem with a crowd of people who were there to welcome Jesus into the city for the Passover celebration. That's why we processed into the sanctuary like we did after Georgeanne read John's account of the triumphal entry. So why, then, did I choose this passage from the Book of Philippians as our text this morning?

During my Lenten journey, I've been making some observations about human nature. And I'm afraid that I haven't made any stunning discoveries or anything. There's nothing new that I have

to share with you this morning that you don't already know. But I think we need to put these observations out on the table if we're going to understand how John and Philippians fit together. Here's what I've observed about human nature -- For all our talk about how we admire people who are humble, quiet, wise, and contemplative ... what grabs our attention the most are the people who are the polar opposite. We are mesmerized by the show-off. The bragger. The rock star. The celebrity. The character. The attention-getter. The showman (or woman.) The ones whose picture gets plastered all over the front pages of magazines and tabloids. And they're out there in the spotlight not necessarily because they're the most skilled people in their professions ... it's just that they know where to be and what to say to get the most attention. We like the Muhammed Alis. We like the John McEnroes. We like the Dennis Rodmans and the Lady Ga-Gas and the Tom Cuises and the Howard Hughes. It's as if their talent takes second place to their outrageous personalities.

How many of you have heard of Anne Getty? Anne Getty is the daughter of Paul Getty, who once held the title of Richest Private Citizen Alive in the Guinness Book of World Records. He was the founder and CEO of Getty Oil Corporation. His daughter Anne is known for her work with Healthy Child - Healthy World. No? Never heard of her? Okay, how about Lauren Bush? No? She funds programs here in the United States that help feed school children in impoverished communities. Nyla Rodgers? Founder of the Global Advocate Initiative? *None* of these names sound familiar? Hmm. How about Kim Kardashian? There we go! We know Kim Kardashian because you can't walk through a grocery store checkout line without seeing her ... face ... mostly ... on half the magazines on the rack. What is she known for? Or I guess I should say, "What is she known for that we can actually talk about here in church?" Now, I've got to give the young woman credit. She does support a number of charitable foundations. She gives to the Alzheimer's Association, the Dream Foundation, the Skin

Cancer Research foundation and other places. But that's not what she's *known* for is it? She didn't start any of these charities. The other young women I mentioned have put their hearts and souls into their respective causes. But do we see them on the tabloids and celebrity news magazines? Sure, these women have articles about them in magazines like *Forbes* and *Global Citizen*, but not *Us* or *In Style* or the *National Enquirer*. I'm pretty sure that you won't see an article about Anne Getty printed in *People* or *The Globe*.

Why are we so drawn to celebrities? We pay to see their movies. We buy their products. We watch their reality TV shows. We go see them in concert. We even elect them to public office! And before you think you can guess who I have in mind when I say that, remember that California has elected two actors to the governor's office! Heck, Minnesota elected a professional wrestler to theirs. Let's move right along back to our scripture lessons before I get into trouble. All four of our gospel writers include the "Palm Sunday" story. All four! That shows you how important this event was! It gives us some insight into how well-known Jesus was. I don't know whether I'm comfortable calling him a "celebrity" just because there's so much baggage that comes along with that title, but you've got to admit there was something going on here in order for Jesus to draw that sort of crowd.

As I said last year, by entering Jerusalem when and where and how he did, he was throwing down the gauntlet to the powers that be. The people who gathered there to greet him with palms and "Hosannas" *got it*. They understood that this occasion was the fulfillment of a prophesy made by Zechariah for the people of Israel to get ready for their coming King -- "Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you: Triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey."

But think about that for a second. Think of the words of this prophesy. They almost don't make any sense when you stop and consider how they're used. "Victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey." How often do you hear the words "victorious" and "humble" used to describe somebody in in the same sentence? What does that even mean? And what does this have to do with the way Jesus entered Jerusalem that day, especially knowing about the betrayal, the injustice, the violence, the death and the mourning that would occur over the next week?

That's where this passage from Philippians comes in handy. Scholars call this passage "The Christ Hymn." We don't know the tune, but we know the words. These words were written to remind the church about what it means to follow Christ. They give us insight into the mind and values of Jesus -- "Though he was in the form of God, (he) did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death -- even death on a cross."

This was a "confessional song." It was a statement made by the church that affirmed what those people believed about Jesus. It affirmed that humility and humble obedience is a virtue. It affirmed that the most important quality in Jesus was his humility. Jesus taught us, "Do nothing from conceit. Count others better than yourselves. Don't do everything for your own self-fulfillment, do it in the interest of others. Live a life of humility." But humility doesn't have many takers does it? We live in a culture that says, "We're number one. I'm number one." We have the number one basketball team; the number one baseball team; the number one musician; the number one artist. Our cultural values infect our hearts by saying that we always have to be number one. The best actor. The best athlete. "Go after the gold because who remembers who came in second?" Well what's wrong with that? Why

shouldn't we try to be the best? Why *shouldn't* we feel proud when we accomplish something great and when we *are* number one? I'm not saying we shouldn't. I'm just saying that we don't have to be so boastful about it. Paul writes, "Do nothing from conceit." What I'm concerned about is how much emphasis we place on trying to elevate ourselves above the next person. We take our brains, our intelligence ... the very gifts that God has given us and we use them to show how much better we are than those around us. Our human tendency is to elevate ourselves above others. We've come to value hubris over humility.

And yet, Jesus taught, "All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted." And of course he set the example for this in his life and ministry. Paul reminded the church in Philippi what it means to be exalted for their humbleness. The second part of the Christ hymn is -- "Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."

As we enter into Holy Week, let's take time to reflect on the supremacy of humbleness over hubris. And may we not fall into the temptation to follow or give authority or think too highly of those who are simply in it for themselves. Including ourselves.