

**Courage and Resilience**  
**Part 1: Humility**  
**Rev. Dr. Chris Alexander**  
**April 8, 2018**

**Scripture: Numbers 12:1-8a and Matthew 15:21-28**

**OPENING VIDEO OF STEPHEN COLBERT AND JIMMY CARTER (2:43)**

**I. Humus**

This morning we begin a new series called Courage and Resilience, which will highlight 7 characteristics of human living, better known as the seven lively virtues: Humility, Gratitude, Faith, Mindfulness/Temperance, Generosity, Hope, and Love. As you saw from the opening video these ways of living in the world take a strong sense of courage, and through this courage we are able to withstand much of what we face when we choose to participate with God in the world. In this courage, we are able to follow Jesus in loving our enemies, doing good to those who hate us, blessing those who curse us, and praying for those who mistreat us.

Today we begin with Humility and two figures from the bible who characterize this virtue, but maybe not in the way you might think. We will be working with Moses, and the unnamed woman who challenges Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew, we call her the “Syro-Phoenecian Woman.”

In our Scripture, Moses is called the “most humble”: *more so than anyone else on the face of the earth* – But is that how we see him? Moses is the man who, in Exodus 9 and 10, stood up to Pharaoh over and over again crying, “Let my people go!” until Pharaoh finally gave in while grieving the death of his son and submitted to Moses’s request. Moses is the man who lead the Israelites through the sea to escape Pharaoh’s army, and Moses is the one who directed the Israelites through their 40 years of wandering in the desert waiting for their grand entrance into the promised Holy Land, and Moses is the man who stood and faced God to receive the commandments for the people to help guide their living with each other and with God in the world. Is this what we think of when we think of a humble person?

The word humility comes from the Latin word *humus*, meaning earth or ground. In this sense, humility means living into the very ground of your being, the humanity in which you were created. To participate with God in this activity, we are not asked to be less than we are created to be, but rather to live within the fullness and abundance of our open curiosity, instead of living in the narrow boundaries of our certainty.

Humility is not tied to weakness or self-abasing concepts of our humanness, but rather points to ignorance as a strength of our humanness. In not knowing everything, we are open to following our curiosities, allowing us to consider many differing interpretations and many alternative solutions to our problems, rather than limiting ourselves to just one way of solving things. In our curiosity, humility is connected to self-confidence, not weakness. How’s that for

an unexpected revelation? Humility, being open to receiving from others, frees us up to a fuller participation with all that is, whether it is our relationships with one another, with our world, or with God.

What makes Moses humble, then, is not that he was somehow “less than” in his living, but rather his ability in his humanness to bow to God, but not to Pharaoh or anyone else less than God. For Moses, bowing before each other in our humility means we are connecting to that part in each other where God dwells and has life. In our scripture, it is Moses’s very nature of humility that God names as to why Moses is different from other prophets and thus *he is entrusted with all my house. With him I speak face to face— clearly, not in riddles; and he beholds the form of the Lord.* –

In humility, we bow to God and to the God in each other in order to open new possibilities for living and creating this world together. At the end of his life Moses stands on Mount Nebo and can see the promised land, but never actually enters it. He has completed his calling of leading his people home, and when he dies, his sons lay him in an unmarked grave with no extra fanfare and no huge monument to his achievements. He is a man, called by God, living most fully into who he was called to be.

## **II. Crumbs from the Table**

Nicholas Kristof, columnist for *The New York Times*, asks this question in his Easter column *In the Bible: Who is the only person who out-argues Jesus in a public debate? The answer is an unnamed gentile woman.* This is the Syro-Phoenician woman in our scripture today. In her humility, she has the audacity to not only disrupt Jesus’s day but continue to challenge him until he promises to heal her daughter. She has been called as a mother who, in her selfless love, does everything possible to nurture and care for her child, no matter the personal risk for herself. This woman’s humility is expressed in her selfless courage and resilience. Here, humility is thinking of oneself less, not thinking less of oneself.

Jesus is walking with his disciples and along comes this woman who is following them shouting *“Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon.”* Jesus ignores her and the disciples do their best to dismiss her, but she refuses to be dissuaded. She continues to be a pest to the disciples until they finally look to Jesus to address her since their attempts at turning her away have failed. They say to Jesus, *“Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us.”* So, Jesus finally turns to speak to the persistent woman saying he was set to serve the house of Israel, thinking she would see her place and give up. But this humble woman kneels before him begging *“Lord, help me.”* Jesus responds, *“It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.”* She said, *“Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.”* Then Jesus answered her, *“Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.”* And her daughter was healed instantly. Courage and resilience in the face of humiliation saved her daughter’s life. She did not think she *deserved* Jesus’s help, yet she asked even knowing she didn’t, hoping that the love Jesus spoke about included her and her daughter as children of God.

J.D. Walt, a poet and theologian, mentioned on his website "Seedbed," *If I am about me, I am selfish; If I am about you, I am humble.* The opposite of humility here is not pride, as is often presumed, but rather it is selfishness. Our Syro-Phoenician woman lives most fully into who she is created to be, when, with nothing to lose, she puts the interests of her daughter first and seeks out the one person she believes can actually help them.

Our biblical narratives are full of stories where humans are confident enough in their relationship with God to question why things are the way they are. Ordinary people like Moses, our Syro-Phoenician Woman, Job, Jacob, and Mary Magdalene are always asking God if things have to be the way they are, or if there might be another way. Asking questions of God and of one another connects us to that selfless place in each of us that allows us to admit we don't know everything, and that the solutions to our problems might just come from the least likely of sources, making us all interdependent in co-creating new possibilities for life.

## **COMMUNION**

God's story includes humility at its finest. Here, in this communion meal, Jesus humbled himself, even unto death, that in his body, broken for us, we might find our strength and calling, every time we share this meal with one another in remembrance of him. And in this meal we might call forth the courage and resilience in each of us to face our callings most fully, as Jesus did the night he took the cup, and said, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood, shared for all people. Do likewise, in remembrance of me." In our humble response to this meal let us affirm who we are and whose we are:

*We are an inclusive, open and affirming family of faith, welcoming all to God's table of love and acceptance. We are diverse, yet united by Christ's example. We care for one another, support one another and challenge one another to become all that God creates us to be. We work together to nurture our community and to promote peace and justice in our conflicted world.*

These are the gifts of God, for the people of God who humbly dwell together in God's house. Please come.