

## Taking the Humility Plunge

### **Philippians 2:5-11 and Matthew 21:1-11**

Throughout our lives we take plunges. When we're kids the plunges can be both foolish and harmful. Usually this kind of a plunge is preceded by "I dare you!" As teenagers, plunges can become dangerous. "I'm just going to try drugs once, just to see what it's all about." If we can survive those years to become well-adjusted adults, we still take plunges.

When we meet that certain special someone and decide to get married, we're taking the plunge. While it may feel like it was destined in the stars, there are inherent unknowns, and thus risks. Susan and I took the marital plunge when she was 20 and I was 22. As I look back on it, I realize we were probably too young to get married. We both had some growing up to do. Fortunately, we grew towards each other instead of apart. It doesn't always happen that way.

Making the decision to have children is taking the plunge. Kids are wonderful, but the economic and physical impact they have on a family is significant. Choosing to bring children into the world is not a plunge to be taken lightly, but must be given very careful thought.

There are lots of plunges we take in life, most of which entail some degree of risk – changing careers or even jobs, investing in the market, buying a home. Each of us can think of lots of other plunges we have taken, and that we will occasionally still take. Each plunge will have potential for either good or bad. With each we are never sure how the plunge will turn out. Such is life.

God took a plunge some 2,000 years ago. He incarnated himself in human form and Jesus landed hard. There were immediate risks. Mary and Joseph had to plunge into Egypt with the infant Jesus to escape Herod's evil. As an adult, the risks continued for Jesus, and he continued to take plunges. He preached love and forgiveness, and plunged headlong into confrontations with the political and religious powers of his day. In calling his disciples, he also took a plunge. Would they follow him? Could they be counted upon to remain faithful and spread the good news? It was not a given. Although Jesus chose the twelve very carefully, they still had free will and could leave at any time of their own volition. One, Judas, did leave and betrayed the Master.

The act of plunging to earth in human form was an invitation to each of us from God to take the plunge with Jesus. We who profess ourselves to be Christians, disciples of our Lord Jesus Christ, by definition, must take the plunge. What does that really mean? The apostle Paul gives us the answer in our reading from Philippians 2:5, "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus." We are to emulate Jesus! We are to think like him, feel like him, act like him. Ponder what that means. The words come easily – love, compassion, forgiveness, acceptance, servanthood, ministry. We know that these words describe Jesus. They are also supposed to be words that describe us.

But Paul takes us deeper than even that. Continuing in Philippians 2:6-8 he says, "...who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself..." Then Paul said of Jesus, "...he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross." The words that jump out here are "emptied" and "humbled."

Throughout his ministry, Jesus evidenced humility. Our reading from Matthew 21 tells of Jesus entering Jerusalem on what we now call Palm Sunday. He didn't ride in on a noble stallion, the symbol of power. Instead, he rode in on a small donkey, the symbol of humility and peace. The crowds were adoring, waving palm fronds, and shouting their hosannas. Jesus did not respond with waves of acknowledgement. He didn't revel in the spotlight, playing the crowd as would a politician or conquering hero. He rode in humbly. He didn't try to stop the adoration of the crowd; neither did he bask in it. He had begun the last week of his earthly life, his Passion. It would be a week of several more plunges for our Lord that would end in death on the cross.

Paul says we are to be of the same mind as Jesus. Of all the attributes that Jesus had that we are to emulate, humility may well be the most difficult. We all have our egos. But Paul knew that we have to

begin with how we view the world, how we think about life. We can't follow Jesus' example if we're worried about our place and prestige in the order of things, or about what we perceive to be our rights and rewards. We can't follow Jesus' example if we're keeping one eye on our neighbor's progress and the other eye on our neighbor's possessions. We can only follow Jesus' example if we are first willing to change our minds about what is important, and adopt Jesus' worldview.

That can be quite a challenge. But challenging or not, we Christians are required to take the plunge into humility. The word "humility" comes from the Latin word *humus*, which means earth, or clay. It reminds us of the prophet Isaiah's words: "We are the clay, you are the potter; we are the work of your hand." To be humble is to allow ourselves to be malleable in God's hands.

Why is being intentional about developing humility taking the plunge? Because to be truly humble, one must give up one's egocentrism and one's pride. Ego and pride define a significant part of who we are. We seek ascendancy, prominence, and recognition.

Martin Luther, of Protestant Reformation fame, used an example of humility that he had witnessed. He had been climbing in the mountains one day, looked up, and saw two mountain goats meet head-to-head on a very narrow ledge. On one side was a sheer vertical cliff that could not be scaled. On the other side was an abyss. There wasn't any room for the goats to pass each other. Luther marveled that neither goat tried to challenge or dominate the other to back down and give way. There wasn't any fight to determine which one got thrown into the abyss so the other could continue on his way. Instead, they just looked at each other. Luther said that neither goat lowered its head. Instead, one goat lay down so the other could walk over him. Then they both continued on their way. One humbled himself so both could proceed in life.

I have to tell you, there was a significant part of my life, where if I had been one of those goats, I would have challenged and tried to predominate over the other goat. You didn't know me 45 years or so ago when I was a young, hard-charging naval officer on the way up. I wanted it all – success, promotions, ribbons on my uniform, top evaluation reports, and I wanted the recognition to feed my ego and my pride. I was obsessed with being successful. There is nothing wrong with wanting to be the best you can be and working for it. But what I wanted was destructive. I wanted the spotlight. I wanted my superiors to acknowledge me as just about the best thing that ever walked in a naval uniform. With time, that kind of attitude about life can take its toll on you physically and emotionally, and it did me.

As I got a little older, I began to back off my obsession with the limelight. Maturity helps in that process. But it wasn't until I became a real disciple of Jesus Christ that I began to understand how out of kilter I had become. In seminary, I finally began to actively work on being more humble. You see, I learned that becoming humble is a process. A person like myself, who was egotistical and even arrogant about who he was, doesn't just suddenly become truly humble. You have to work at it, and it takes time for humility to evolve.

I also learned that as one seeks to act out humbleness, false humility is a stage that one goes through. In one of my seminary classes, the professor called upon me to give a five-minute extemporaneous presentation on a topic he selected. When the class was over, a young woman half my age came up to me gushing about how wonderful my presentation had been without any preparation. There it was – that spotlight again. I responded with a smile and a dismissive wave of my hand as I said, "Oh, it really wasn't anything." And, of course, I was enjoying her adoration. But then this young woman, who was wise beyond her years, brought me up short. Fixing me with a steely stare, she said, "You have just discounted my opinion of your presentation and I value my opinions. Rich, you need to learn to just say, 'Thank you.'" It is a lesson I have never forgotten.

I am a lot more humble than I used to be. That in itself is not a humble statement. Do I have true humility? No, I do not. I am still, as they say, a work in progress. But I am conscious now of trying to be humble. I am not always successful. My ego and pride can still well up within me. The difference now is I am aware of it, and I can chastise and correct myself.

An important part of my ministry is lay empowerment. I am not the sole dispenser of ministry and you are not the sole consumers of it. Each of you is also a minister, called upon to serve those around you in your daily lives. I am up front on Sundays because I am your pastor. But I don't seek the limelight. I want you to share it. I don't want credit for what this church is all about, nor for what it may become, because together all of us are the body of Christ, because we are all called to be of the same mind as Christ.

What I have learned is that real success in life, and in the church, belongs to those who have truly accepted the self-giving of Jesus as their model for Christian behavior and living. It belongs to those who do nothing from self-ambition and conceit, but in humility regard others as better than themselves. It belongs to those who define themselves not in terms of position and power, but rather in terms of usefulness to God with a desire to serve him.

There is a surprising truth about taking the plunge into humility. It brings quiet honor upon those who exhibit it. Further on in the Philippians 2 passage, Paul tells us that God exalted Jesus after he humbled himself. The same is true for everyone who is willing to take the plunge into humility. So – go ahead! Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus. Take the plunge! Amen? Amen!

- Pastor Richmond B. Stoakes, Carbondale Community United Methodist Church, 17 April 2011  
[Passion/Palm Sunday]