

Let me begin by saying we will not solve the humble/‘umble debate. If you didn’t know there even was a humble/‘umble debate, you are not alone. I had absolutely no idea that such linguistic navel-gazing even happened until a few years ago. I was speaking with a friend and she said, “’Tis good to be ‘umble.” I paused for just a moment before asking her, “do you mean humble?” Admittedly it was one of my less astute moments, and she fixed a withering glance on me before replying, “I said ‘umble. The ‘h’ is silent.”

She was certainly not ‘umble about it. I’ve been trying to prove her wrong ever since. But that is a whole other etymological essay that I won’t bore you with today. Perhaps another time.

But it is good to be humble and it does seem that humility can be a virtue that is in short supply much of the time.

I read a brief piece this past week that suggested that one of the great models of humility, Thomas More, was quite obsessed with advancement. He wanted to achieve great things, he just didn’t want to *look* like he wanted to achieve great things. So he systematically place himself in places where his humility would be noticed and thereby advanced his career and notoriety. I’ve seen it observed that never has any one person been more promoted for their humility than Sir Thomas More.

If humility is in short supply, it seems at times that false modesty is not. How often do we reply, “Oh, no problem, it was nothing,” when in reality we are thinking secretly, “I worked my backside off on that, but I don’t want to look arrogant or make anyone feel bad?”

At times it seems that we are awash in a sea of false modesty, making sure we don't claim too much about what we do or what we have accomplished lest we appear in some way self-promoting. I wonder if we do sometimes secretly fear that we might be assessed and found wanting, that we might be the recipients of a judgment similar to one rendered once by Tallulah Bankhead, "well, this truly is less than meets the eye!"

So instead of celebrating what is done and striving for more, we demur.

'Tis good to be humble, certainly, but 'tis better to be authentic.

Authenticity is certainly prized by most people. To be deemed authentic, the real deal, the genuine article is appealing to us. It is certainly more appealing than the alternative, being deemed inauthentic, a fake, an imposter is more than most of us could handle in the darker recesses of our psyches. If you add to that the pressure of perfection that many people feel, a culture that eschews weakness, that preaches, "fake it 'til you make it," and those opportunities to be truly and deeply ourselves, to be authentic to our core seem every more few and fleeting.

I really do believe that most of us are as we present ourselves to be, that what you see is what you get. I certainly seek to be that way myself, to be authentic and real. But I would hazard that none of us is looking for extra opportunities to have the shower curtain ripped back and all our flaws exposed. I would further hazard that for each of us, there are one or two, maybe three or four other people that we will let see the majority of ourselves. We may be, indeed are, authentic, but that doesn't mean it is all going to hang out!

What I'm saying is essentially, we do want to present ourselves well, but we don't want to look slick, like pre-packaged goods. In short, we don't want to be assessed like those Pharisees. We don't want anyone to say, "well, this truly is less than meets the eye!" That applies to our worship of God as well. That does seem to be the heart of Jesus' message today. Taken in the short form as we read it today, our passage ends with that odd verse about the humble being exalted and the exalted being humbled. But before we get to that point, Jesus, preaching to a crowd excoriates the scribes and the Pharisees. And the topic of his criticism is the wearing of their faith. The phylacteries that Jesus mentioned were little boxes, or in some cases, not so little boxes, in which were contained various verses of Torah, a literal application of the admonition that we read last week to bind certain verses – particularly that we are to love the lord our God with all our hearts, souls, minds and strength - on our foreheads. The fringe referred to tassels that might be worn, ten of them, to remind the wearer of the Decalogue, the foundation of the law. The admonition to bind the verses to our heads is an admonition to live them authentically, to make them part of our lives.

And when Jesus skewers the scribes and the Pharisees, it is an almost comical image that he uses, that of having the biggest box bound to your head and the longest fringe, trailing on the ground, so that there would be *no* mistaking one's commitment!

Based on an easy reading of this text, it would be easy to dismiss the Pharisees as the villains of this story, to demonize them and dismiss them. And certainly it has been done plenty. But it is probably far more likely that Jesus deeply *loved* the Pharisees. They might have gotten it wrong, but they were trying to be faithful. Some have suggested, I think rightly, that Jesus' continual engagement with the Pharisees indicates that perhaps

they were among his closest conversation partners. Think of it: with whom can you go at it hammer and tongs? Only with the persons who are absolutely the closest to you.

There are probably one or two, maybe three or four people any one of us can engage in a knock-down drag-out and know that at the end of the day, they will still love us. It is why spouses, partners and siblings often draw the strongest ire. It is entirely possible, indeed it is probable, that Jesus' favorite conversation partners were the ones who knew the law deeply.

It is due to passages such as these that the Pharisees are seen as such hypocrites in the Bible. I'd like to say a word on behalf of the Pharisees. The Pharisees had *great* intentions. They were the folks that studied the Bible, who could tell the Jew-on-the street just what it took for them to be sure that they were practicing right relationship and right faith. They took the Bible seriously. They took faith seriously. If anything, a church should be so lucky as to be filled with Pharisees! They are the pillars of any given church. There's just one problem. They have let ritual warp the practice of their faith. And along comes Jesus.

Along comes Jesus and he *rattles their cages*.

The cage rattling comes in two parts. We read the first part today. First Jesus attacks them for being haughty and claiming a pride of place because of their ecclesial status. It would be like me claiming I am a better Christian than you because I happen to be clergy. I'm clergy, which means I fulfill a particular function in the church, it does not mean that I am a super-Christian or without flaws. No, my function as clergy is to do a particular job, not to claim the best parking space or the head of the lunch line at the congregational

lunch by virtue of being the minister. Jesus rails against the abuse of ecclesial status as being perceived and treated as rank.

And in the more interesting part of the sermon, Jesus launches into a listing of seven *woes* to the scribes and Pharisees which are a bit akin to a “shame on you” moment. The one that stands out perhaps the most to me is the image of tithing the spice rack. The practice in Jesus’ day was to dedicate one tenth of one’s accumulations at all times. It is the root of the modern practice of tithing in which we take a portion of what God has blessed us with and return it to God. When Jesus launches into the tirade about false practice, he mocks the Pharisees for literally dumping out the contents of each jar in the spice rack onto a scales and taking out one tenth of the contents for the temple. The irony is that Jesus doesn’t seem to mind that they give, indeed he regularly admonishes his followers to be generous givers, it’s not even that he finds the practice of tithing the spice rack absurd, though it does appear he considers it absurd.

Jesus is concerned that they are missing the forest for the trees and being self-congratulatory about it.

And so he rattles their cages. And he rattles them hard.

And it seems to me that the unenviable homiletical task of the preacher preaching this text is to do the same. In other words, I’m *supposed* to rattle your cage right now.

And to be perfectly honest, I’m not really into rattling your cages right now. I’ve only been here nine months, and I’d like to stay.

So instead today, I want to tell you how to rattle your own cage. It’s a worthwhile exercise if you take it seriously. You don’t need me to rattle your cage for you. I feel certain you can do it quite well.

Here's how: ask yourself a question. Feel free to write it down. Be honest, and be self-critical.

Here's the question: how, *specifically*, does my faith in Jesus Christ affect my life?

This may prompt a whole series of follow-up questions. They're worth exploring. In fact, if you want to give your cage a thorough rattling, I suggest asking this question of every aspect of your life. Ask it of your family life. Ask it of your sex life. Ask it of your financial life. Ask it of your civic life. We could get specific about each of these questions, but you don't need me to.

That ought to rattle all of our cages sufficiently. And I want to be really clear, we ought to celebrate what is good as well as identify what could use work. What we're really talking about is being stewards of our lives and our faith.

Jesus is critical of the Pharisees for going through the motions, for reducing faith to that which doesn't really cost them anything, doesn't really change them in any discernable way. They've got phylacteries on their foreheads to cover up holes in their hearts.

When Jesus criticizes, it is not to tear down anyone, it is to offer an alternative, a way of life that is transformative.

That's what we're offered, that's what Jesus wants for us, and to tell you the truth, it is almost always easier to get something down to going through the motions. I'm guilty of it. I expect we all are at some point.

The idea that Jesus expects something of us can be a little bit hard to live with.

There is a danger that comes with preaching grace all of the time, and I'm not going to stop preaching grace so I better identify the danger so that we can all be cognizant of it:

the danger is this: that we might become so fixated on the idea that Jesus loves us that we miss the fact that Jesus loves us and so wants to transform us.

That's why this passage about the scribes and the Pharisees is so far from the gentle Jesus, meek and mild of so many Sunday school classes. This is Jesus *loving* the Pharisees!

Jesus calls us to a faith with teeth.

Your session has approved a survey that will form the beginning of a long-term plan.

You'll hear a lot more about it coming up soon. It will happen after the first of the new year because they wanted to be deliberate about not letting it get lost in the holidays.

We're going to rattle our own cage so we can make sure that our faith in Jesus is leading us in the right direction.

I don't share this so that we might be self-congratulatory about our deliberateness. I share it because I believe it is a model for faithful discernment. Jesus is calling us to go a particular way and it's useful from time to time to check the road map to be sure we're on the right path.

The Pharisees weren't bad people. They just took a wrong turn and they couldn't see it.

Every one of us could do that.

Every one of us could let the grind of the day to day pull us out of faithful practice.

Every one of us could let the allure of comfortable practice keep us from seeing what Jesus is calling us to do.

'Tis good to be humble, but 'tis better to be authentic.

You see, it's the authentic you that Jesus loves. We can't fool him with facades.

There's a wonderful scene in a classic 1960's era movie about the preacher Peter Marshall. His wife Catherine recounted it in her biography of him in more detail. Dr. Marshall loved a large thanksgiving turkey but hated the reality of living with the leftovers. In scene in question, he lifted the lid off of the casserole on the dinner table, took one look, and said, "Catherine, you better return thanks. God knows I'm not grateful for turkey hash and I can't fool him."

'Tis good to be humble, but 'tis better to be authentic.

God knows us, and God loves us.

But God wants us to be better than we are. That's the point of growing in the life of faith. That's the point of asking questions of your faith. That is the point of thinking about your practice.

We baptized Anna this morning and we made her a promise that I admonished you to keep. We make it to everyone. We rely on it for ourselves. It's that we're going to walk along this path together. We're going to support each other. We're going to challenge each other. We're going to walk as equals and love each other. It's a long path. Church is a marathon, not a sprint. It seems to me we need make sure we're fit for it. Jesus does have expectations of us. There's nothing wrong with celebrating what is good so long as we are honest about what needs work. And we don't walk the path alone. We're all in this thing together and God is in this thing with us.

And with God, "truly, there is more to this than meets the eye."

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.



