

ALTAR YOUR LIFE

“If you feel you are being deflated, you must have let yourself become a balloon.” This is a Taoist saying, not at all commensurate with our way of thinking. In the Western world, we believe that self-confidence and self-esteem are highly meritorious. We talk about building ourselves up and building each other up. We believe in advertising. Our present-day theology is shot through with an aggressive, strident, PR flavoring, and so is most evangelism. Therefore we are always feeling like we have to “pump things up”; we have to “go get it”; we have to “shoot” some drive and enthusiasm into things. Therefore we also tend toward exhaustion, workaholism, a chaotic pace. It is nearly impossible to get any relief in our culture unless we get sick or depressed. We walk around feeling like the bottom is about to fall out from under us. Much of our favorite myth and story and song is about the need to “hold each other up.” (From falling to where? Or to what?) Beneath this is often a great fear that the “holding up” cannot last, or that there is nobody to hold us up.

So we are always talking about climbing and striving, mountain-top experiences, getting high (natural or otherwise), being lifted, and so forth. The Taoist is always talking about getting lower. Our favorite symbol is the eagle, soaring prince of the heights. The Taoist’s best symbol is water: it always runs downward, always fills in the lowest places first, always seeks its own level. To the Taoist, the heights are unstable, untrustworthy, not lasting or valuable. Fluff is what you find at the top. The lower you get, the more you find the foundations, the valuable, the truth, the lasting, the things that matter.

I am not trying to turn you into Taoists, but it is an interesting contrast. The contrast does seem to suggest a Way of Pride versus a Way of Humility. The question is: “Why have we become a prideful way?” Why do we think and speak in prideful images? How have we come to this state in which we assume that we can “take God or leave God alone,” however it suits us?

We do not have to become Taoists to get back to humility. We could just become Christians – that is, get out of the American religion and into the Christian faith. “*He hath put down the mighty from their seats*” – is a Christian eager, then, to become mighty, either as an individual or as a nation? “*And hath exalted the humble and meek*” – is a Christian, then, interested in humility and meekness?

What about our Lord and His teachings? Did He come here to serve or to be served? Jesus condemned the pride of race (Matthew 8:10-13; Luke 10:29-37), the pride of the Pharisees – that is, spiritual pride which results in ostentation (Matthew 6:1-18; 23:1-36; Luke 18:9-14) – and all forms of social pride (Matthew 23:5-7; Luke 14:7-24). He enjoined His followers to have the humility of children (Luke 18:15-17) and bade them to refuse all titles of honor (Matthew 23:8-12) and positions of privilege (Mark 10:35-45). The washing of His disciples' feet was the perfect symbol of His life of lowliness (John 13). Even more by His life and deeds than by His words, Jesus introduced a new virtue into the world: Christian humility.

Those of you who admire Jung: Do you ever wonder about Jesus' shadow? If He was sinless and lived so much toward the light, what was His shadow like? Surely it was to rule the world from and for His own purposes. The wilderness temptations make that pretty clear. And so does the amount of time Jesus spent in prayer to keep straight. Those of us who study and contemplate His life usually conclude that He could have done it, too – that He had the genius and the charisma to make Alexander the Great look like a school boy. (Of course, we cannot tell how quickly His powers would have begun to scramble if He had headed in that direction.) Anyway, the important thing is HE knew it! And He turned from it. It was a clear choice on His part. He knew He could go either way. He chose humility as the WAY.

For those who think I make up some of these things, here's a quote from *A Theological Word Book of the Bible*: "A distinctive feature of biblical religion is its teaching about pride and its converse, humility; this is unparalleled in other religions and ethical systems. According to the Bible (and to the classical Christian moral teaching), pride is the very root and essence of sin. Sinfulness consists essentially in the rebellious pride which attributes to self the honour and glory that are due to God." (p. 176)

Pride, then, has always been seen as the chief of the Seven Deadly Sins, and the one from which the others take their power. Pride is what broke the relationship with God in the first place. Pride is at the root of all alienation and separation. If any of you have ever tried to live with a proud person, you know exactly what that means and how it works, and how much chance any relationship has to grow or thrive as long as pride dominates the scene. Well, same thing between us and God, only many times more so. Yet we are a proud people, and we are proud most of all of our pride.

“We are a proud nation.” “It was a proud day.” “You filled my heart with pride.” Such phrases actually sound fine to our ears. And worse, the proper sentiment sounds terrible to us: “We are a humble nation.” “It was a day of meekness.” “You filled my heart with humiliation.” That does not sound right or glorious at all, does it? Not to our ears. It would, though, to the saints we claim to honour.

Sometimes I see your faces when we sing the old hymns, especially around Lent. My goodness, I remember the last time we sang “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross.” When we got to the phrase “and pour contempt on all my pride,” some gulped and carried on, but about ten folks just clammed up; they could not handle it. What will we do some Sunday if we sing “Rock of Ages” or “Amazing Grace”?

Nevertheless, if pride is the greatest and chief of all the sins and its converse is humility, then what is the chief and greatest virtue in Christendom? What is the greatest of all the Christian virtues?

Humility does restore relationship, returns us to communication, makes us teachable. Humility cuts down the barriers and lets gratitude and thankfulness come flooding back in. Humility takes away the pressure and unbearable tension. In humility, we do not have to hold each other up or be held up. We are who we are and what we are, and when our feet are on the foundations, we do not have any fear of falling.

St. Augustine comments: “There is something in humility which, strangely enough, exalts the heart, and something in pride which debases it. This seems, indeed, to be contradictory, that loftiness should debase and lowliness exalt. But pious humility enables us to submit to what is above us; and nothing is more exalted above us than God; and therefore humility, by making us subject to God, exalts us.”

There is only one proper attitude of the creature toward the Creator: HUMILITY (subservience, obedience, obeisance, lowliness, modesty, reverence). It does seem to me that if I try to put my finger on the one quality most lacking among church people today, it is this humility. It is not completely absent; it is just weak, partial, and sporadic. If I try to think about what is most needed in our own church, I don’t come up with the same equation I hear from some of you or from our boards and committees. They say we need more kids, more money, more projects, different programs, different sermons.

All those things might be nice, but they won't do it. What we lack most is humility before God. If we take down the barriers, let God in, let God have God's way with us – each one of us, more and more – then God can use and inspire us to whatever else is needed. “*Seek God's kingdom first,*” then all the rest – the youth director, the kids, the programs, etc. – will be added unto us. We will get them as soon as we are ready – as soon as we have been prepared.

I need to add that whatever I think I need or want, what I always really need in my own personal life is more humility. Likewise, the only conflicts I have had with anybody since coming to this church have been with people who think they do not need to be humble before God.

It is easy to get off track and dwell on the point, but it does need to be said that humility before God does not necessarily mean being humble before other people. Humble people, it seems, tend to stay humble with everyone as long as they can. They practice staying low like the water. But when obedience to God conflicts with people or issues in this world, humility shows the power of being close to the foundations. Moses was meek and humble before God, but Pharaoh would not have given him any humility awards. General William Booth, founder of the Salvation Army, was asked for the secret of his amazing faith. He said, “I simply told the Lord that he could have all that there is of William Booth.” That's true humility, but the man was fearless, undiscouragable, and uncompromising in his purpose. Billy Sunday is not my favorite theologian, but he was dynamic and he stayed true to his purpose under incredible pressure. They said he feared God so much that he feared no one else. One of his friends was trying to get him to be more gentle about his convictions and said, “Billy, you always rub people's fur the wrong way.” Mr. Sunday replied, “Let the cat turn around.”

Humility is the *only* appropriate response of the creature toward the Creator. We have no rights except from God. Our moral codes and laws seldom state but still assume God's authority. If you murder me, the state will punish you for abusing God's property. The state does not often remember it anymore, but – if you track it back to its origins – that is the only reason the state has authority or interest in how we treat each other. The king, by divine authority, was to govern the kingdom *for God* – that is, as God's representative. Though we change the structures and hand the responsibility from king to President or

to Congress or whatever, the assumption is still there. It is God's authority and purpose behind it all. Otherwise the whole structure crumbles without reference point – without rhyme or reason.

We have no identity or purpose without God either. We are not truly self-contained, self-made, or self-sufficient. That is all a ruse – a posture we adopt and use in public. The only fitting attitude of the creature toward the Creator is one of humility. The difference between us is too great: in power, in wisdom, in purpose, in love, in everything. It is no insult to consider myself unimportant in comparison to God. That is the simple truth – just an honest assessment. If God chooses to lift us up and give us importance (as God does), that is God's privilege. But we still might remember that this whim of God's is the only reason – the only basis – for any importance whatsoever on our part.

Much of the time I do not understand why God considers me or anything else important. I like some things and I like some people, yet I see other folks crazy about things I cannot get at all excited about. So I know there is something to it that I do not yet understand, but I do not know how it all fits together. I may get glimmers, but I do not know where it is all going, how to fix it, what will “work,” or how to help. Nevertheless, I keep trying to take God's word for it, as nearly as I can. God's revelations, made most powerful in Jesus the Christ, are still the greatest hints we have. If Jesus died for you, you must be important. I do not know why – I mean, that goes a long way beyond my personal feeling of liking or disliking you. If the Son dies for you, you must be important or He would not do that. I must be important too. I have an even harder time figuring *that one* out. But there it is.

A visiting American textile buyer told a long, amusing anecdote at a luncheon in Seoul, Korea. The translator repeated the story to the group in just a very few words, and the audience burst into uproarious laughter and enthusiastic applause. The American was pleased by such a warm response. His anecdote was subtle and complex, and he did not usually get such a reaction. Later on, when he got to know his translator better, he told him how good it felt to be thus appreciated, and he wondered how his story could be expressed in so few words in Korean. The interpreter smiled sheepishly and said, “It was easy,” he explained. “I simply said, ‘Man with large checkbook has told funny story. Do what you think appropriate.’”

Well, God's checkbook is beyond compare. If God wants to love people, that's God's affair. Maybe we do not catch all the reasons and innuendos, but we can still figure out what the appropriate response is.

Someday I hope we all understand the entire story God is telling with us and in all Creation. Meanwhile we can still do what is appropriate, and the only thing appropriate is humility: Obedience and subservience. Putting our lives on the altar. Giving it all over to God. That is the issue behind every issue from the Christian standpoint. Our response to God's love is a humble desire to love and to obey God – a putting of our lives on God's altar. (A sacrifice is anything dedicated to God.)

That is the Great Divide between those who walk the Christian Way and those who merely play at it. Do you personally NEED Jesus? Is it a game to you – an interesting idea? Or is it the very core of life and death for you?

There is a lot to understand, and the Holy Spirit keeps working very hard to increase our awareness and our understanding all the time. But that is not the core of it. It does not come from or depend on that level of intellect. It starts with knowing our dependence, knowing our need – knowing who we depend on and who we are grateful to, and then putting our lives on God's altar: living only to do God's will. If it is true, it is the only real and lasting hope. If not, nothing matters anyway.

Dr. J. Henry Jowett, a well-known English preacher, was talking to an old salt about sailing a ship, and he asked him, "Will you explain to me the phenomenon of the wind?"

The seaman replied, "I don't know what you mean, Sir."

Jowett persisted, "Well, how do you explain the wind which propels your great ship?"

"I don't know anything about the wind," said the sailor. "But I can hoist a sail."

Neither do we understand the moving mystery of God's power and purpose. But we *can* report for duty each morning.

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