

# A Season of Joy: HUMILITY

**Proverbs 15:33, 18:12, 22:4**  
**Luke 14:7-11**

*You're nothing special; isn't that great?*

A sermon preached by  
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This week several of our church staff made another trip to Kansas City to attend the Leadership Institute at the United Methodist Church of the Resurrection. Adam Hamilton is the founding and senior pastor there, and this conference draws people from all over the country and several foreign countries each year. The Church of the Resurrection is the largest United Methodist Church in the world, and Pastor Adam is a well-known leader in the denomination, author of dozens of books, and just kind of a big deal.

Last weekend, Carey and I had an opportunity to have dinner with Adam Hamilton and about 40 other people in Fayetteville before he spoke at an event last Saturday. What impressed me the most was how he acted at the dinner. The hosts insisted he go through the food line first, but then he sat down beside an elderly man who was all by himself, and they were having a big conversation. After Adam got through eating, he got up and went and sat down at each table, asking people where they were from and what their church experience was and getting to know their story.

I thought it was remarkably humble for Adam to make himself available to people and to be interested in what they had to say. Whenever I have talked to him at the Leadership Institute, he has responded with that same openness and authenticity. He has a spirit of genuine humility.

We are talking for a few weeks about the overall theme of Joy. We are using a resource called *The Book Of Joy* by Douglas Abrams, about a week of conversations between the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Desmond Tutu.<sup>1</sup> Each week we will examine an impediment to joy, a pillar of joy, and a practice of joy. This week the attitude that leads to joy is HUMILITY.

One of the things that prevents us from joy is frustration and anger. There is a lot of that going around these days. People seem angry and frustrated at the government, at their bosses, at their families, at the weather, even at random strangers. In the book, Abrams recalls a time when the Archbishop was driving him through Jacksonville, Florida. How

does a holy man drive in traffic? Suddenly a car cut in front of them and the Archbishop had to swerve to avoid hitting the other car. Instead of reacting with anger or a case of road rage, Tutu merely chuckled and made a remark about some truly amazing drivers in Florida. Then he mentioned that maybe that driver was on a family emergency, perhaps to the hospital to be with a sick family member. Instead of reacting with instinctual anger, the holy man responded with humor, acceptance, and even compassion for the other driver.<sup>2</sup>

Anger is related to last week's impediment to joy—fear and anxiety. Anger is a reaction based in fear. We are afraid that we will not get what we need, that we will not be loved, that we will not be respected, or that we will not be included. These fears frustrate our deeply-held desires. Frustration brings on anger. So we get mad. But anger is not productive.

The Dalai Lama suggested that if we find ourselves feeling anger, and understanding that anger is based in fear, we can ask ourselves some questions. What am I afraid of here? What did I do to help create the situation that is making me angry? Sometimes frustrating situations are our own making. What hurts or fears might the other person have that is making me angry? Should I respond instead with compassion? (Notice how close that response is to the Archbishop in traffic.)

Anger, like fear and anxiety, is not productive of joy because it is self-centered—usually. There is a type of anger that is righteous. There is anger over injustice or the mistreatment of vulnerable or marginalized people. That's good anger, and it's not what we're talking about here.

When we think through our frustration and anger and calm down, we can return to joy. We can cultivate an internal spiritual attitude that is not destroyed by external circumstances that might make us frustrated or angry. We can be HUMBLE; that's another pillar of joy. Humility comes from the word *humus*, from the Latin word for earth or dirt. Genesis 2 reminds us that we are created from the dust of the earth, from the dirt. Every Ash Wednesday we receive the ashes on our heads as a reminder of our earthly nature, and we hear the words, "You are dust, and to dust you shall return." With that perspective, we are bound to stay humble.

Last week I mentioned the perspective of the astronauts as they looked at the earth from the moon. That perspective can also make you very humble. Al Worden was part of the Apollo 15 mission to the moon in 1971, but he was the pilot of the command module. That meant he was circling around the moon while the other two astronauts went down to the lunar surface. It was a lonely job, but it gave Worden a unique and humbling experience. He said:

I got to look at the universe out there with a very different perspective and a very different way than anyone had before. What I found was that the number of stars was just so immense. In fact, I couldn't pick up individual stars, it was like a sheet of light. I found that fascinating because it changed my ideas about how we think about the Universe. There are billions of stars out there—the Milky Way galaxy that we're in contains billions of stars, not just a few. And there are billions of galaxies out there. So what does that tell you about the Universe? That tells you we just don't think big enough. ... [Y]ou want to feel insignificant? Go behind the moon sometime. That'll make you really feel that you're nothing!<sup>3</sup>

Archbishop Desmond Tutu and the Dalai Lama both shared the quality of humility. Neither were interested in any special treatment ever, even though they were world leaders and recipients of the Nobel Peace Prize. In fact, they laughed over several stories about encounters with pompous, egotistical leaders who lacked joy and looked foolish. Archbishop Tutu knew a bishop who was getting ready to ordain candidates for the priesthood. They were discussing the qualities of Christian virtue, including humility, and one of the candidates confessed that he had been looking for a book on humility, but hadn't been able to find one. The bishop replied, "Oh, yes, I have written the best book on the subject."<sup>4</sup> If you think you're really good at humility, you are not really good at humility.

One of Tutu's often-repeated stories was about the bishop who was praying in the cathedral one day, beating his breast and crying out to God, "Oh, Lord, I am nothing! I am a worm!" A priest came in and heard the bishop and knelt beside him, crying out, "Oh, Lord, I am nothing! I am a worm!" Then an altar boy came into the sanctuary and saw the priest and the bishop, and he, too, knelt beside them and cried out, "Oh, Lord, I am nothing! I am a worm!" The priest looked at the boy and said to the bishop, "Look who thinks he's a worm."

Our ultimate example of humility is our Lord Jesus, the Son of God, the Word Incarnate, the King of Kings, the Alpha and the Omega. He is a pretty big deal, yet such a humble man. Our Scripture text tells the story of the time Jesus was going to the home of a leader of the Pharisees for sabbath dinner. When he got to the house of this prominent man, he noticed how all the dinner guests were jockeying for position. The seats closest to the host were more honorable than the seats at the foot of the table. So Jesus offered a teaching: If you are invited to a dinner, don't sit in the place of honor, in case the host might ask you to give up your seat to someone more important. Rather sit in the humble seat, and maybe your host will ask you to move up higher, and you will be honored. Then Jesus made a statement that is repeated in some form in all the Gospels and in the writings of Paul, Peter, and James in the New Testament: "*All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.*"<sup>5</sup>

Jesus said stuff like that many times. But he also backed up his teachings on humility with actions of humility. The night before he was crucified, according to the Gospel of John, Jesus took a basin and a towel and washed his disciples' feet. This was a task for the most menial servant in the house. Jesus not only served his disciples in this way, he set them an example for how they ought to live. He said, "*Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord, and you are right, for that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you.*"<sup>6</sup>

Then, within 24 hours, Jesus would give his life in the ultimate sacrifice of humility and love on the cross. This led Paul to write to the Philippians, "*Do nothing from selfish ambition or empty conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. ... Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, ...who, ...emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, ...he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.*"<sup>7</sup>

Humility is a key value in Christianity. It is essential in order to follow Jesus. Humility is essential to find joy. Ego and pride rob us of joy. Ego is based on insecurity; if you see someone with an oversized ego, have compassion for that person, because he or she is insecure on the inside. Pride is based on fear that we are smaller than we are. So we puff

ourselves up and try to be big. But we are not small. We are not anything special, but we are not small. We are essential. We are not accidental or meaningless. We are a functioning part of the body. (Remember how we talked about Romans 8 and I Corinthians 12?) We are all part of the body of Christ. Being humble does not mean that we do not appreciate who we are. We have something to offer, and we can offer it with courage and joy.

Archbishop Tutu concluded his thoughts on humility with these words, “No one is a divine accident. While we may not be special, we are essential. No one can fulfill our role but us in the divine plan... Sometimes we confuse humility with timidity. This gives little glory to the one who has given us our gifts. Humility is the recognition that your gifts are from God, and this lets you sit relatively loosely to those gifts. Humility allows us to celebrate the gifts of others, but it does not mean you have to deny your own gifts or shrink from using them. God uses each of us in our own way, and even if you are not the best one, you may be the one who is needed or the one who is there.”<sup>8</sup>

The impediment to joy we want to avoid is anger and frustration. The pillar of joy we want to develop is humility. And the practice of joy we want to learn today is a Buddhist meditation practice called *lojong*.<sup>9</sup> *Lojong* simply means to decrease your self-absorption. A *lojong* meditation on humility means to focus on others besides yourself.

Reflect on all the people who are responsible for your life. Think of everyone who has had a significant and positive influence on you. Of course, your parents gave you life and raised you, but also your teachers, pastors, and neighbors. Think of those you do not know who made your clothes and grew your food and had a hand in everything you enjoy from day to day. Think of those who discovered or invented all the things you take for granted every day: TV, computers, phones, transportation. Then think of your ancestors, who endured hardship and survived to make a line of succession which led to you. Finally, think of your family and friends who give meaning and purpose to your life right now.

Now simply allow your heart to open up and experience love and appreciation for all these people you have remembered in your meditation. Experience the joy that comes from being in touch with all that has been given to you, all those who have poured into your life, how weak we are without them, and how strong we are because of our connection.

In that attitude of remembrance, gratitude and humility, I invite you to the table of Jesus today. He gave his life for us. He gave us this meal to share. As we partake of these elements, God’s grace grows in each of us. Even though we don’t deserve it, we have it. It has been given to us, and our hearts are filled with gratitude and joy.

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<sup>1</sup> The Dalai Lama, Desmond Tutu, and Douglas Abrams, *The Book Of Joy* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2016).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 101f.

<sup>3</sup> Richard Hollingham, “Al Worden: ‘The loneliest human being,’” BBC (11-18.14)

<sup>4</sup> *The Book of Joy*, 206.

<sup>5</sup> Luke 14:11.

<sup>6</sup> John 13:12-15.

<sup>7</sup> Philippians 2:3-8.

<sup>8</sup> *The Book of Joy*, 210f.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 48, 330.