

October 23, 2016
Rev. Diane Monti-Catania

Sermon - "Saints and Sinners"

For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.

This passage is being read in Christian churches all over the country today.

By following the Common Lectionary we share readings with our Christian brothers and sisters worldwide.

The lectionary is a compendium of scripture readings for the church year grouped by theme and seasonal relevance.

For each Sunday there is a psalm, a reading from the Hebrew Scriptures, a reading from the gospels and one from the epistles.

The oldest extant manuscript of a lectionary is one developed in Edessa, Greece in 475 AD.

During the time of Augustine (354-430), in the 5th century, there was pressure placed upon worship leaders to adhere to the agreed upon lectionary readings.

These lectionaries held in place for centuries.

In the 16th century most Protestant reformers initially retained the old Roman lectionary.

During the 18th century there was some experimentation with deviating from the proscribed readings but by the 20th century there was widespread agreement that adherence to a common set of readings enhanced the Christian believers exposure to the whole canon.

So here we are today, in 2016, in the midst of a heated political campaign hearing Jesus' parable about humility, a lesson that has been heard for thousands of years.

Scripture, my friends, is timeless.

God's inspired word to us remains relevant over the centuries.

Our human condition – the things that tempt us – the things that trouble us basically remain unchanged.

In the first century when Jesus lived, Pharisees and tax collectors were considered polar opposites.

Pharisees were seen as very pure people who strictly followed the laws of God, while tax collectors were viewed as unclean and utterly separate from God.

An important point of this lesson is that these two men, the exalted Pharisee and the humble tax collector were praying in the same temple.

If they were here in our church and happened to be sitting next to one another they would have had to pray for each other!

Here they stand in the holy temple, one seeking mercy and one congratulating himself on how great he is.

Jesus says it is the humble servant who attracts God's attention.

I spent a lot of time this week researching and writing about the Black Church for our *Peace Through Understanding* event in November.

The thing that impacted me the most was the way the American slaves embraced the story of Exodus in the Hebrew scriptures as a way of envisioning a future – beyond this earthly life, where they would be rewarded.

Their trust in God's promise gave them hope in what would seem to be a hopeless situation.

They developed the ability to turn inward for peace and solace, rather than depending on outward signs of recognition and reward.

They gathered in secret places to worship God, to sing praise to their creator and to sing and pray for solace on the other side.

They believed and were supported by the idea that the humble would be exalted in God's kingdom.

The black church evolved as a separate entity because the White churches would not fully welcome former slaves into their midst.

Those that did allow blacks to participate segregated them to separate parts of the sanctuary.

Here's a great story I came across in a book called *Then Sings My Soul: 150 of the World's Greatest Hymn stories*:

At the end of the civil war the American Missionary Association started Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee to provide education opportunities for freed slaves.

George White (who was white) was recruited from New York as the music instructor.

Mr. White taught his students classical cantatas and patriotic songs, but he was intrigued by the old plantation melodies he heard the students singing in the dorms and between classes.

When the university was in danger of closing due to financial constraints, Mr. White convinced the administration to let him form a choir with nine of his students to travel about the country and raise money.

Travelling was difficult and the nine African American students were not treated well, having to give up their seats on trains to white passengers or being evicted from hotels by hostile business owners.

The small group braved threats, insults, obscenities and indignities singing to near empty halls and churches.

Then came the National Council of Congregational Churches meeting in Oberlin, Ohio in October 1871.

The delegates to the convention were reluctant to surrender any time to the visiting chorus so Mr. White had them sing during the breaks.

The story goes that the delegates were weary from bad weather and long business discussions.

As the singers filed into the choir loft the sun came out and streamed through the windows.

Every face turned toward the music – the beautiful brooding harmony entranced the audience, which broke into wild applause... *Steal away, Steal away to Jesus*

Among those present was Henry Ward Beecher who begged the group to come to his church in New York for a concert.

Hence the Jubilee Singers were born and what we know today as ‘African American Spirituals’ were written down, recorded and found their way into our hearts and worship.

Nobody knows the trouble I've seen; Nobody knows but Jesus. Nobody knows the trouble I've seen; Glory Hallelujah!

Indeed the humble were exalted!

Where do you fall on the continuum between the humble and the exalted?

More importantly, where do you want to fall?

Do you want to be a humble servant of God or do you crave recognition?

The humble servant toils away without hope of recognition or earthly reward.

The exalted person, according to Henry Ward Beecher, is never happy "Pride slays thanksgiving....A prideful man is seldom a grateful man, for he never thinks he gets as much as he deserves."

Being humble, following Jesus takes work.

It takes insight.

We wrestle with what we know is right and true and try to reconcile those beliefs and values to our world today.

We read scripture, come together for worship and search for meaning in both our lives and in our world.

I truly think much of our wellbeing depends on our ability to generate understanding within.

When we look to others-to the outside for recognition and validation we subject ourselves to someone else's version of who we ought to be.

But, when we search ourselves, our hearts and our souls for our genuine self, created and beloved by God, we are able to accept our lives as a gift granted by God.

This week in a post called 'Standing for Love' Ron Rathbun wrote "Within you is one of the most beautiful oases you will ever find; it is absolute love. Seek the oasis within your heart, mind and soul. If you cannot find your oasis, you are living in a desert. Walk out of the desert, into the openness of your mind, and you will see your oasis. Start your journey by loving yourself each day. Fill your chalice with love from your oasis within so when you meet others who are thirsty on the road of life, you have something to share."

From our brothers and sisters in the black church we learn that community is the place where we gather to remind ourselves that God is love and that God's love extends to each and every created being in this life and in eternal life as well.

Saints or sinners? Humble or exalted? Only God knows what is in our neighbor's heart.

I pray that our 21st century communities can overcome divisiveness and partisanship and can lift one voice in praise of our God-the God of our ancestors – the God of our tomorrows.