

## Homily, January 30, 2011

### Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Zephaniah 2:3; 3:12-13; Psalm 146:6-10; 1 Corinthians 1:26-31; Matthew 5:1-12a



Last weekend, as I began preparing in earnest for this homily, I took a break to watch the Green Bay Packers play the Chicago Bears for the conference championship. As you may know, the Bears' starting quarterback, Jay Cutler, left the game early in the third quarter because he injured his knee.

After the game there was a controversy over comments made about Cutler on Twitter by some current and former NFL players. They questioned his toughness and courage. Some doubted that his injury was serious.

Of course, it turns out that his knee injury was serious and that he did not quit ... the coaches pulled him from the game.

Since humility is a theme that joins the Old Testament reading to the Beatitudes, I couldn't help but wonder about what role pride and humility played in this controversy. Given the importance of the game, Jay Cutler must have been struggling with both.

But the struggle between pride and humility doesn't just happen in athletics; it is part of our fallen human nature and an important aspect of our call to Christian discipleship.

*"Seek the Lord, all you humble of the earth, ... seek justice, seek humility,"* says the prophet Zephaniah.



Courage, toughness, and competitiveness are important traits for an athlete. But pride can corrupt those qualities: courage can become foolish recklessness. Toughness can become presumption. Competitiveness can become a vain pursuit of glory.

Pride, in the Christian tradition, is the root of all sin and all the vices.

Pride, as Christians understand it, is not simply undue self-esteem and self-love seeking honor and attention. It can foster a sense of independence that pushes God aside. Such pride leads to a deadly form of self-sufficiency, self-reliance and a self-seeking morality.

Humility stands opposed to pride and is the foundation of the virtues:

- It promotes gratitude and contrition in place of vanity.
- It leaves no room for presumption but encourages magnanimity.
- It lays the foundation for prudence so that courage does not become recklessness, and caution does not become cowardice.
- It encourages meekness in place of a hot temper and a readiness to take offense.

The words *humility* and *humble* are derived from the word *humus*, the Latin word for *earth*, and it helps to think of a humble person as someone who has both feet firmly planted on the ground.

Humble people are grounded in the truth that all that is good in them, and in others, comes God.

Humility not only promotes the other virtues, but it provides the foundation of prayer and helps us to develop a “poverty of spirit” that reflects our dependence on God.

Today many of the words we use to describe the virtues often have a negative connotation. Prudence, meekness, charity, mercy, righteousness, and, of course, *humility* are, more often than not, used derisively.

Yet they are words that can be ascribed to all the saints and holy people: Mother Theresa, Joan of Arc, St. Francis, Thomas Aquinas, John Paul, Dorothy Day. These were humble people who used well the good gifts God gave them.



Blessed are the meek, the merciful, and the peacemakers:

- Are you '*even-tempered*' or do you get crabby or '*fly-off-the-handle*' at the least little problem or annoyance?
- Are you a stickler for justice or can you accept that sometimes mercy is the better way to restore friendship or respect, or maintain communion with those you love?
- When people in your family, or your friends or your colleagues are angry and estranged, is it just easier to '*mind your own business*', or can you do the hard work of helping them reconcile?

Blessed are the poor in spirit. Blessed are they who hunger and thirst for righteousness. Blessed are they who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness.

- We make time for so many non-essential things in our life: TV, videogames, shopping, gossiping. Do we make time to pray or read the Bible? We can even spend too much time doing good things, yet never stop to thank God for what we have and do.
- Do you let society set your moral and ethical standards? Do you call in sick just to get a day off work? Live with someone before marriage? Go to all the popular movies no matter how raunchy? Or ... do you want to live a virtuous life?
- Are you afraid to keep the commandments because your friends will consider you pious or a prude? Will you argue for the ethical course of action at work, or for considering the *common good*?

Through the Beatitudes Jesus teaches us about the meaning of true happiness, and how to find it. The Beatitudes are also his promises to us, although they are paradoxical because they sustain our hope in the midst of trials and tribulations.

He gives us the sure hope that we may share in the divine life of the Trinity. It is a gift beyond anything that we can imagine.

But we have to accept that it is a *gift*.

We have to set aside pride, and grow in humility: recognizing that all that is good in us -- all our blessings and talents -- are a gift from God and meant to be used in service to others and to the kingdom of God.