

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Michael J. Hoyt
Glenshaw Presbyterian Church
Palm Sunday
March 28, 2010

The Choice: Power, Love, and Humilityⁱ

Isaiah 50:4-9; Philippians 2:5-11

Over the last 5 weeks,
we have been journeying through the Season of Lent.
Our guide and companion during Lent, as in every day of our lives,
has been Christ, the Lord,
who, during his own earthly life, spent 40 days in the wilderness,
fasting, praying, and facing the hardest of temptations.

But this year we have been helped along in following our Lord,
by a fellow traveler who has gone before us,
Ignatius of Loyola,
whose has designed a set of *Spiritual Exercises*
we've been considering.

We've reflected on the foundation of Ignatian prayer,
that everything in the **creation** is a gift of our Loving Creator
which we can happily receive provided we use the gift to the glory of God,
and to make a return of love to God.

We have also asked to have our eyes opened to see and be **sorrowful** over
the depths of sin and brokenness and outright evil
in the world around us, and in our own hearts.

Having considered the depths of the world's dismal situation,
we have then heard **Christ calling** us to join him
in being a force for good, for light, and for love;
that is, to join him in doing the work of his coming kingdom.

Last week, we reflected on the choice we repeatedly face in following Christ:
the **Two Standards**, or banners, around which the forces of good or evil rally.
We may choose the way of worldly riches, honor, and pride;
or we may choose the way of spiritual poverty, rejection, and humility,
which is the way Christ chose.

Today, we take a further step in considering the way of **humility**,
which is a central tenet of the Ignatian way
(and which is also, by the way, a central tenet of Calvin's piety,
and the spirituality of the Reformed Tradition.)

Let me say again, though, that we shouldn't think that the cursory look at the *Spiritual Exercises* provided by these sermons is any sort of substitute for actually doing the exercises, which happen either in a 30-day retreat, or according to the 'busy people schedule' meeting regularly with a spiritual director for a period of months. If anyone is interested in actually experiencing the *Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius*, please let me know, and I would love to put you in touch with someone who is trained to give them.

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Each of the Gospels in the New Testament, Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, and the Pauline letters, give us a particular perspective on the life and teaching and significance of Jesus Christ.

Each Gospel is slightly different in its focus, in what it accents, in what it minimizes. That's why each of the Gospels is called The Gospel "according to..."

This is an important thing to remember because we all know how messages get communicated.

"A" says something which "B", "C", and "D" hear.

But something happens between the saying and the hearing so that B, C, and D may hear different things, sometimes *significantly* different things.

Those differences usually have to do with the context of B, C, or D's life, and especially what sort of things are one B, C, or D's mind and heart at the time.

Well, we have been considering the Gospel according to Ignatius. And, no doubt, we've been hearing these sermons through our own ears, which means we've been getting at least a degree of "the gospel according to each of our own hearts."

We have to trust that somewhere in all this mixture of humanity, from Jesus' words, to the gospel-writer's words, to the preacher's words, to our minds and hearts, the Word of God lives on and is communicated by the Holy Spirit.

The Gospel according to Ignatius makes one particular emphasis:

Jesus' poverty:

Ignatius uses the adjective *poor* more than any other to describe Jesus.

For Ignatius, this can translate into the life of the believer as either *spiritual poverty* (which is most likely the case) or, for some who so choose it, *actual poverty*

(that is, the poverty of one who chooses to renounced material wealth
for the sake of his or her spiritual life;
not one who is forced into poverty by powers beyond his or her control;
though one who is forced into poverty,
may also then feel led to choose it and live into it
in this intentional way - make sense?)

To be poor in this Ignatian sense, is to be humble, to have a spirit of humility.
Do you know how the word "humility" is derived?
It comes from the word "humus" (not hummus, like the stuff you eat, but *humus*)
Humus means *earth* or *ground*.
To be humble is to be a person who has little to separate you from the ground.
A person of the earth.

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Today we have read a scripture that contains
what is probably one of the earliest known Christian hymns,
written and probably sung by the early church.

*Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,
who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited,
but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form, he humbled himself...*

Out of love for us, God made the ultimate sacrifice of humility:
God became poor.
God became humble by giving up heaven and descending to earth,
descending to the "humus."
Being found in human form, he humbled himself...
The very act of Incarnation was for God an act of humility, a choice to be poor.
Let the same mind be in you.

Then, once in human form,
God did not try to compensate for this loss of power and glory
by acquiring all sorts of material wealth and status.
Jesus was even offered all this by the Devil himself -
bread aplenty to fill his stomach,
political power over all the kingdoms of the earth,
and the glory religious status and recognition that he surely deserved.
Eventually, by living a life true to his calling,
and by speaking words of truth to the people,
the power of Jesus' humility became a threat
to those who held so tightly to their own power,

and they began to lash out in anger at this poor, itinerate preacher and healer.

Eventually, Jesus went the way of Isaiah's suffering servant
*I gave my back to those who struck me,
and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard;
I did not hide my face from insult and spitting.*

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Ignatius invites us to imitate the poverty and humility of Jesus.
He invites us to move through Three Stages of Humility:

First, to desire to be with Jesus in such a way
as to have no serious rupture with him.
This is the minimum:
that we do nothing that would cut us off from God.
This is the basic humility necessary for salvation.

Secondly, to desire to follow Jesus so closely that we eliminate
even minor differences between us and him.
To say "I desire to do your will in all things, even small things."

Thirdly, is the desire to be so closely associated with Jesus
that we endure the suffering and rejection that he endured.
We accept suffering even when it is not our fault, or anyone's fault.
We are willing to be rejected, "spit upon" so to speak,
regarded as a fool by the world, as Jesus was.
We give up our need to be seen as "wise or prudent or esteemed"
by the world.

Of course, there are more than three points along the spectrum
from human pride to godly humility.
These three stages are not actually distinct points in our human experience.

But Ignatius wants us to see that we have a choice to make,
a continuing succession of choices:
to choose spiritual poverty, rejection by the world, and humility;
or to choose the way of power, status, and pride.

And let's not fool ourselves,
it is not just the politicians who are tempted by power,
it is not just the business executives on the top floor, corner office.
It is each one of us who is tempted.
To exert ourselves, our own will, our own control, our own *minds*, on others

and ultimately on God.

But Ignatius would invite us to say what Jesus said,
“Not my will, Father, but your will be done.”

And in the strange paradox of grace,
to find that in the embrace of powerlessness and poverty
we find ourselves ultimately rich as the children of God.

It is only the willing embrace of such humility
that Jesus endured his Passion to it's conclusion on the Cross.
It is only the willing embrace of such humility
that will enable us to enter into this Holy Week
with the openness of heart to receive what God wants to give us.

ⁱ Three funerals in three days (Friday, Saturday, and Sunday) has necessitated that I rely heavily on David Fleming's chapter "Knowing the Jesus Who is Poor" in *What is Ignatian Spirituality* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2008). The sermon follow the chapter closely.