

Sermon- 9-20-2015

Text- James 4:5-8 & John 17

Title- "That We May Be One"

Have you ever been humbled? Do you know what that feels like?

I often say that the greatest humbling I ever received came on the weekend that I was let go from a church ministry position I held in North Carolina. It wasn't just that I got fired- it was the fact that I had no idea it was coming so I had taken my youngest daughter with me and she was sitting on my lap as I got the news. Meira had been coming down with a pretty serious illness and I was holding her in my arms as I sat down across from the leadership team of my church. I had no idea that the reason they wanted to meet with me that morning was to let me know that the church had nearly exhausted its funding and would no longer be able to retain my services. I walked back to my car after our meeting feeling like the wind had been knocked out of me. One month of severance was all they could afford, and all that stood between my family and an empty checking account.

Making matters worse, Meira's condition deteriorated and we took her to the hospital where they admitted her for pneumonia. My wife stayed with her that night while I took our other daughter home. Calls began pouring in from friends at church who learned I had been let go. I didn't sleep. I couldn't eat. I prayed for my daughter and for a job. The next day I loaded up Aria to go to the hospital and on the way she complained that she wasn't feeling very good. When we arrived at the hospital, Aria threw up all over the floor of Meira's room and Meira, sick as she was, still managed enough lungpower to cry most of the time we were there. Now Aria is crying too, and Jennifer is holding her while I try to console Meira and we spent the day that way. When it was finally time to leave I walked with Aria in my arms through the halls of the hospital and she threw up again, this time all over my back. With no change of clothes I had to drive the 30 minutes home with my shirt soaked and stinking of bile, my oldest daughter sick and asleep in the back of the car, my youngest daughter in a hospital room with pneumonia, my wife sleeping in a chair next to her bed; jobless, almost penny-less, and with no prospects.

Humbled. That's what I was at that moment. I'm guessing that you've experienced a version of this story. Trade out my details and insert yours and you've been humbled too, right? Maybe you were let go from a job you loved, or maybe a school rejected you-- or if it wasn't a school, maybe it was a person you really cared about. My guess is that each of us, to some degree, have experienced what it means to be humbled. And here's where I'm going to ask a question that might seem ridiculous, but I'm going to ask it anyway- what if this humbling we experienced wasn't an entirely bad thing?

I know that sounds a little crazy or even cruel- what isn't bad about getting fired with two sick daughters and having one of them throw up on you at the hospital? What could possibly be good about any of that?

The dictionary defines the word "humble" as: *Having or showing a modest or low estimate of one's own importance. Marked by meekness or modesty in behavior, attitude, or spirit; not arrogant or prideful.*

I don't know what the circumstances were for you in your moment of humbling, so I can't speak for you, but for me, that low moment, that seemingly disastrous chain of events in my life, forced me to acknowledge- and struck a blow against- what I've come to learn is my great adversary: my pride. My ego. My self-importance. On that day my sense of imperviousness, my vanity, my deluded sense that I had everything under control unraveled. And I would like to suggest that being humbled in that way brought about some surprisingly positive changes in my life.

Today is Group Link, it's an opportunity for us as a church to invest in relationships with each other, and I want to suggest the greatest obstacle preventing us from developing good relationships with other people—whether here at Harbor, or at your work, or with your family or spouse—is not busyness, or obligations, or personality differences, it's pride.

Pride is a good relationship's great adversary.

Pride is concerned with *me* not *we*.

Pride is *self*-focused not *sharing*.

Pride draws attention to *I* instead of *us*.

And here's what makes this attitude of the heart so insidious, it runs in direct contradiction to God's desire for how we should live. Our pride, our self-concern our inward focus, when that's the predominant tilt of our hearts it's in conflict with how our Creator designed us to live.

Look in our text for today. It's found in the book of James in chapter 4:

5 Do you think the Scriptures have no meaning? They say that God is passionate that the spirit he has placed within us should be faithful to him. 6 And he gives grace generously. As the Scriptures say,

"God opposes the proud

but gives grace to the humble."

7 So humble yourselves before God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. 8 Come close to God, and God will come close to you.

Many people believe that God is real and that God loves them, and yet they can be just as selfish, messed up, and anxious as everybody else. Belief ought to make a big difference in our lives. It should make us more loving, more generous and more humble, and yet belief alone doesn't do that in so many cases. The reason it doesn't is because beliefs don't automatically turn into changed thoughts and feelings and behavior. It's God's Spirit at work in our hearts that transforms our character and this is a process we have to participate in. One of the ways we do that is by building relationships with each other so that we can help each other to grow and mature in faith.

The importance of real community

The Scriptures teach that we believers are to honor one another; accept one another; bare burdens for one another; forgive one another; confess sins to one another; and honestly, very little of that type of activity is necessary in this room. Some of it we can do, maybe- confess to one another, maybe we accept each other- but really the active, living-fully, loving-deeply, giving-freely stuff happens outside these doors. No matter how inspired we become in here (and I do hope you are inspired), but the real working-out of our faith happens in our homes and at our workplaces and in our communities.

So if *this* is the main way you experience Harbor, in this room for this hour, then it's possible you are missing out on what it means to be a part of the community of faith that God designed you for. The majority of our faith journey happens outside of this room. We become like the people we spend time with, eat with, open our hearts to and see face to face; these are the people, primarily, who shape us. So if your desire is to have a vibrant faith and a thriving relationship with God, the most effective way to bring that about is to build relationships with other followers of Christ.

Think back to the prayer Jesus prayed during the last meal he has with his closest friends and followers. In John 17 He says:

²⁰I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, ²¹that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. ²²I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one— ²³I in them and you in me—so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.

What Jesus is saying is the number one tool God gave us to demonstrate who He is to the world, is the beauty and depth of our love for each other.

The problem is, too often we simply want to please ourselves. Our needs are more important than the needs of others. We live a life of convenience and control and comfort, and what we want supercedes the needs of anyone around us.

What's wrong with us at this point is wrong 100 times a day. An old scholar, George McDonald wrote: "The one principle of hell is this: I am my own." There are two ways to live, basically: **my life for yours** or **my life for me**. It's either your needs above mine, or mine above yours.

The "**my life for yours**" principle is the only one in which any *life* is really possible. To embrace it is to live; to refuse it (to live my life for me) is to Spiritually die.

Pride is the ultimate obstacle preventing us from good relationships. That's the root of the problem.

V. 6 "God opposes the proud" v. 10 Humble yourself before the Lord

If the reason for community breakdown is pride, then the healing agent is humility.

So what is humility? We're not talking about shyness or lack of assertion. That's a worldly definition of humility, but what's a Biblical definition of humility?

Humility is not thinking less of yourself, it's thinking of yourself less. Humility is not a lack of confidence, it's focusing on yourself less because you are supremely confident of your value and worth to God and that He is in charge of the circumstances of your life.

Humility is admitting your life is not your own, that you need God to be God, and letting Him lead you- placing your life under His authority. That's humility.

There's something we must have to get this kind of humility growing in our lives We must have an understanding of the enormity of God's love for us.

The promise of verse 6 is wonderful. Even if you're a person who struggles with pride, God gives grace generously. That's the amazing promise of verse 6. That's the grace of salvation I believe. James is saying no matter what your life is like, if you're proud and your wisdom is earthly- if you're a person who is far from good, God has grace for you. He gives grace generously. I believe it's justifying, sanctifying, glorifying grace that he's talking about, the grace of salvation, saving grace.

Literally verse 6 says He gives greater grace...greater grace. What is grace? What do we mean He gives grace? You know what it means, don't you? It is God showing favor to us who are undeserving. That's what it is.

And within that favor is forgiveness and love and the promise of heaven and the Holy Spirit and all Spiritual blessings and understanding of God's Word and joy and peace and all the fruit of the Spirit. All of that comes as God's favor given to people like you and me- who don't deserve it. And God promised that grace is available to all who come in faith to Christ...greater grace than the depth of depravity, grace greater than the power of sin, grace greater than the might of Satan, grace greater even than death.

One writer (A. Monteur) said it this way, *"What comfort there is in this verse. It tells us that God is tirelessly on our side. He never falters in respect of our needs. He always has more grace at hand. He is never less than sufficient. He always has more and yet more to give. Whatever we may forfeit when we put self first, we cannot forfeit salvation for there's always more grace. No matter what we do to Him, He is never beaten. We may play false to the grace of election, we may contradict the grace of reconciliation, we may overlook the grace of indwelling but He gives more grace. Even if we were to turn to Him and say...what I have received so far is much less than enough...He would reply...well you may have more. His resources are never at an end. His patience is never exhausted, His initiative never stops, His generosity knows no limit...He gives more grace."*

When James writes, "Humble yourselves before the Lord and He will lift you up," this is part of the topsy-turvy, what's up is down, what's down is up- principle that's at the heart of the universe. Over and over again the Bible says those who humble themselves will be exalted, those who exalt themselves will be humbled. The first will be last, the last will be first. He who wants to find his life will lose it, but he who loses his life for my sake will find it. If you lay down your life for God and others, if you die to your own power and control, you will get your life back forever safe and sound. But if you hold on to your life, if you say 'I don't want to lay down my life for others I want to live for me,' it'll slip through your grasp. Maybe not today- but one day.

The way up is down, the way down is up. The way to have true power is to give your power away and serve. And the way to feel eternally great about yourself is to admit your need for a savior and to allow Jesus to become that for you.

In Jesus Christ, we see '**my life for yours**' in its perfect state. We see the greatest act of humility. God in the flesh, laying down his life. In Philippians 2 Paul writes:
6 *Though he was God, he did not think of equality with God as something to cling to.*
7 *Instead, he gave up his divine privileges; he took the humble position of a slave and was born as a human being. When he appeared in human form,*
8 *he humbled himself in obedience to God and died a criminal's death on a cross.*

So we know God designed us for and calls us to selfless relationships. And we've met the enemy preventing us from pursuing these kinds of relationships—it's *us*. Our pride. What do we do about it? Outside of waiting for a humbling experience to come along and chop us down to size—and let's all just admit that's a terrible idea!—how can we begin to make some strides in this area, practically speaking?

I'd like to suggest a few ways that we can do this?

First, most of us can very quickly identify a self-focused activity or preoccupation that steals time from the people around us and prevents us from engaging in relationships with others. Think about where you're investing your time, find the pursuit that is most frustrating to those who want more of your attention, and curb it. I don't know what that means for you, and I'm not suggesting that what you're doing is even a bad thing, in and of itself, but if it's frustrating the people around you and it's preventing you from investing in relationships maybe it's time to back away from it.

I'll try to be more specific. If you're prone to over-indulgent phone time, it's appropriate to ask if the trade off is worth it? I know this can be a really bad area for me. I've decided I'm going to remove some of the apps on my phone where I waste my time and I'm going to commit to less web surfing when I'm at home with my family. If it's not your phone, for you it might be video games. Maybe it's time to put some parameters on how long and how often you play. Maybe for you it's reading? If you're often secluding yourself from others with your nose in a book, it might be a good idea to set some boundaries on reading time. It could be sports- and guys lets be honest, overindulging in this area is easy during the NFL season. How can you curb the amount of time you spend watching games? I could go on- some of us are seriously overworking ourselves and need to get home to our families. Some of us watch too much TV.

I want to re-emphasize that I'm not suggesting any of these activities are inappropriate in and of themselves, I'm simply asking us to consider whether we are over-using them and in so doing robbing those around us of our full attention.

My Second Suggestion- If you choose to curb or minimize an area in your life that you've determined is wasting time, then it only makes sense to be intentional with the time you're saving. Less *me* time should equate to more *we* time. Eat dinner together at the table with your family. Invite someone to share a meal with you. Listen. Observe. Learn about the people you are most often around and when appropriate serve them. Assist. Lend a hand. Today you have an opportunity to join one of Harbor's Journey Groups. Sign up, not simply because it suits you, but because you view it as an opportunity to invest in the lives of others. Oh, you'll derive some benefit, no doubt, but don't sign up for that reason alone.

Listen, there are plenty of ways to involve yourself in building relationships with your family, your friends, your co-workers, & your neighbors but they slip away from us because we're preoccupied with ourselves. Seize the opportunities as they come. Our lives will be richer for it because we were made by God to share in selfless relationships.

One Final Suggestion- Ask God to help you grow in this area. If Jesus himself thought it worth praying for on our behalf, then it only makes sense that we join Him in seeking God's help to build unity among us. In fact, I would go so far as to suggest God's role in this is crucial. For some of us, relationships are hard. We've been hurt before and we're reluctant to open ourselves up again. Pray to God for wisdom and strength as you trust Him in this area. Some of us are introverts. We're not inclined to put ourselves out there with others. Pray to God for the ability to cultivate a few close relationships and to invest in them fully. Some of us are extroverts. We have never met a stranger, and yet too often our conversation is limited to self-interest. Pray to God for an empathetic heart and ask Him to give you an unselfish attitude in your interactions with others.

1. Help me to develop a heart of humility instead of vanity and pride.
2. Help me tend to the needs of others rather than being absorbed with my own.
3. Help me to be concerned with what pleases You God, instead of what brings me recognition.

What do you think will happen if we begin to think of ourselves less and invest in the lives of the people around us? What do you think will happen if, with God's help, we begin to see others the way He sees them and if we begin to love them in the way He has loved us?

I'll tell you what will happen, because it's what Jesus prayed. We will *"be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that (God) sent (Jesus)"*... and that He loves them, because they will have witnessed that love in action through us.