

“DEEPER IN FAITH,” A Sermon delivered by the Reverend Dr. Geoffrey G. Drutchas at St. Paul United Church of Christ, Taylor, February 17, 2021

Tonight we gather to observe and celebrate Ash Wednesday. It's an occasion in our Christian calendar that inaugurates the new season of Lent. As a single day, however, it's also intended to remind us of the folly of human aspirations and ambitions when we don't walk with God and think that we can live well without an ongoing relationship with him. The ashes of Ash Wednesday are the charred remains of palms previously waved to welcome Jesus into Jerusalem like a hero at the start of Holy Week. But they are intended to serve us this evening a symbol of our own human mortality and the feebleness of our plans, schemes, and dreams. It's all underscored by the very words with which the ashes are distributed or administered: "From dust ye come; to dust ye shall return."

God our creator made us just a little lower than the angels, gifted with powers of consciousness, self-awareness, and introspection. (*Psalms 8:5*) Yet all too often human beings conveniently forget our place in the scheme of things and act as if we are gods, indestructible and immortal. This is especially true when we are young. But in our contemporary age, when everyone seems to have fantasies of staying young and being immortal, it's a problem for all ages, young and old. We see this in the rampant desire to be famous and the obsession with people who are—if only for the proverbial fifteen minutes that the late artist Andy Warhol half-joked about.

The ancient Greeks, whose rich culture informed and inspired early Christians, had a term for such human arrogance and self-inflation. They called it hubris. In many of their own myths and stories hubris on the part of even the greatest men and women led to their inevitable defeat and demise.

Quite independently, the Jewish culture from which Jesus emerged had its own concerns regarding human arrogance. In its hallowed scriptures it condemned overweening human pride. We hear this loudly and clearly in the Old Testament Book of Proverbs which declares that "Every one who is arrogant is an abomination to the Lord; be assured he will not go unpunished." (*Proverbs 16:5*) Proverbs subsequently adds: "Pride goes before destruction and a haughty spirit before a fall." (*Proverbs 16:18*)

Going beyond this mere warning, the Book of Psalms, which is found very close to Proverbs in the Jewish scriptures, offers us a sober and somber meditation on human mortality and limitation to help us check any arrogance and excessive pride. Specifically, Psalm 90 declares: "Lord, thou hast been our dwelling place in all generations. Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever thou hadst formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting thou art God. Thou turnst man back to dust, and sayest, 'Turn back, O children of men!' For a thousand years in thy sight are but as yesterday

when it is past, or as a watch in the night. Thou dost sweep men away; they are like a dream, like grass which is renewed in the morning; in the morning it flourishes and is renewed; in the evening it fades and withers... For all our days pass away under thy wrath, our years come to an end like a sigh. The years of our life are three-score and ten [which is seventy], or even by reason of strength, fourscore [which is eighty], yet their span is but toil and trouble; they are soon gone, and we fly away... So teach us to number our days so that we may get a heart of wisdom." (*Psalms 90: 1-6, 9-10, 12*) Very eloquently here, the psalmist calls upon us not to exaggerate our own importance. Only God is immortal, "everlasting to everlasting."

As human beings, we aren't going to live forever—at best we can hope for seventy or eighty years. With modern medicine to help, maybe we can extend our life span to ninety or one hundred. But let's not kid ourselves. Even a hundred years on earth is a relatively short and finite time. We are each fated to wither and die. Yet the psalmist delivers *more* than bad news. He or she informs us that when we are realistic about the true scope of our lives we gain an invaluable wisdom that can enhance the quality of the years we do enjoy. Indeed, in almost every situation when we realize the clock is running out on us we are prone to make better use of our time. This is true in a counselor's office, where it is sometimes said that the best healing work gets done in the last ten minutes of a session. It also applies on the sports fields where incredible touchdowns and homeruns can turn around a dismal game at the last minute. Last, but never least, the recognition that we are time-limited on this earth can energize and deepen our faith life.

Of course, the opposite of the human hubris and arrogance that prompts people to act as if they are more than mere mortals is humility. It says a lot about our culture and times that some folks don't even understand the word anymore. It's not part of their vocabulary. Quite simply, humility means to be humble as a matter of choice, rather than because we are forced to be so as in those instances where we find ourselves *humbled* or *humiliated*.

Whether we speak of humbleness or humility, it's a great virtue according to the scriptural teachings old and new. Here wisdom from the Book of Proverbs speaks again. Proverbs 15 states: "Humility goes before honor." (*Proverbs 15:33*)

Likewise, Proverbs 22 announces: "The reward for humility and fear of the Lord is riches and honor and life." (*Proverbs 22:4*) Even the Prophet Isaiah has something to add on humility. "The meek," he prophesizes, "shall obtain fresh joy in the Lord." (*Isaiah 29:19*)

Yet it is in the New Testament that humility is particularly enshrined as fundamental to our life of faith. Jesus warned us not to put our trust in ambitious, self-aggrandizing rulers or to think that the monuments they build are going to last forever. Sitting outside

the magnificent Jerusalem Temple erected by King Herod the Great, Jesus prophesized that in time to come not a single stone of it would remain standing. Like Herod, who was a brutal and greedy monarch, it would all bite the dust. (*Mark 13:1-2*)

In his ministry Jesus repeatedly affirmed that it was meek, the modest, and the humble who in the end were going to be the most blessed by God. (*Matthew 5:5*) At one point Jesus shared a particularly illustrative parable about a marriage feast in which the man who chooses the best seat is humiliated by being asked by his host to move to a lesser place; while the man who selects a lesser place from the outset is approached to upgrade his seat elsewhere. Jesus concludes the parable, saying: “Whoever exalts himself will be humbled and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.” (*Matthew 23:12; Luke 14:7-11*) Similarly, Jesus remarks at another moment: “Whoever humbles himself like this child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.” (*Matthew 18:4*)

When, despite all his preaching and teaching, his own apostles started jockeying for first place at his side in the glorious kingdom to come, Jesus emphatically explained that “the first shall be last, and the last shall be first.” (*Mark 9:35*) In case they didn’t understand, Jesus added: “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them. It shall not be so among you; but whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave, even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” (*Matthew 20:25-28*)

As we all know, Jesus practiced what he preached. He embodied the great truth that he taught. On the night he met the devil in the wilderness, he refused every temptation given—bread, earthly power and might, and the opportunity to show off his relationship with God by jumping from the pinnacle of the Jerusalem temple so that his Father in heaven would be compelled to dispatch angels in order to save him. Thereafter, in his remaining forty days and nights in the desert, Jesus continues to go without food and sturdy shelter. Later, throughout his ministry, Jesus bravely copes with constant uncertainty. As he remarks to his own apostles, warning them the cost of following him could be great: “Foxes have holes and the birds of the air have their nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.” (*Matthew 8:19-22; Luke 9:58*)

Ultimately, Jesus faces the terrible humiliation of death on a Roman cross, which was the most brutal form of execution then known to humankind. He is mocked and tormented to his last dying breath. But he bears it humbly, modestly, without anger, outrage, or complaint.

Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross inspired the Apostle Paul to write in a famous Letter to the Philippians: “Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Jesus Christ, who though he was in the form of a God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but

emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” (*Philippians 2:6*) Yes, in his suffering and sacrifice, Jesus provides the model for our own conduct and behavior.

As the Apostle Paul admonishes us, we should all follow Jesus’ example. Accordingly, in the very same Letter to the Philippians, Paul writes: “Do nothing from selfishness or conceit, but in humility count others better than yourself. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.” (*Philippians 2:5*) Further preaching in the same vein, the Apostle Paul wrote to the Christians in the neighboring town of Colossae that “As God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved,” they should “put on compassion, kindness, lowliness, and patience.” (*Colossians 3:12*)

As many biblical scholars have noted, the Apostles James and Peter didn’t always see eye-to-eye with Paul, who was already out to ministering to Gentiles, rather than sticking to the Jewish community as they were. Nevertheless, James and Peter completely agreed with Paul that a sense of humility was fundamental to the faith that Jesus preached. The Apostle James, Jesus’ half-brother, spoke right to the point when he commanded all professed disciples to “Humble yourselves before the Lord and he will exalt you.” (*James 4:10*) Meanwhile, the Apostle Peter sermonized even more extensively. “Clothe yourself, all of you,” he said, “with humility toward one another, for ‘God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.’ Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, that in due time he may exalt you.” (*1 Peter 5:5-6*)

Having witnessed Jesus’ fate either directly or indirectly and already experiencing persecution personally, all the apostles knew that the promised exaltation as reward for humility would not dawn easily or soon. In fact, for each of them individually it came only through later martyrdom when they were either crucified, decapitated, or mowed down by Roman troops. But, heeding Jesus in their own lifetimes, they personally set aside all hubris, relinquished any quest for worldly acclaim, and disavowed the pretense of immortality in this life in favor of an eternal life with God in a heavenly realm where Jesus was awaiting them. Embracing Jesus as their Lord and Savior, these men accepted their own mortality in this world and grew infinitely wiser because of it, becoming the saints we still cherish.

Perhaps not everyone can be a saint and spiritual exemplar in the way that each of the apostles proved to be. Nevertheless, tonight, we can seek to be more like Jesus and them. As you arrived tonight, each of you received a packet of ashes prepared from

previous years' palms. Before our service finishes tonight, in a moment indicated by the order of service as an "Imposition of Ashes," I invite you to dip your finger in these ashes and use them to make the sign of the cross on your own forehead. May this act of imposition be for each us a sign of our very personal commitment to a deepening of faith in which we follow the example of Jesus and his apostles—rejecting arrogance, accepting our own mortality, pursuing a life of humility, and embracing our need for the eternal salvation that only Jesus the Christ can make possible. In a world populated with folks big on themselves who, with outsized egos, are preoccupied with how they look and what others think of them, let us be men and women who "do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with [our] God." (*Micah 6:8*) **Amen.**