

“KEEPING HUMBLE,” A Sermon delivered by the Reverend Dr. Geoffrey G. Drutchas, St. Paul United Church of Christ, Taylor, September 19, 2021

Congregation, a couple of lifetimes ago I was a summer camp counselor up at Ferry Beach, Maine for middle school kids. Our summer camp week was called “Good Connections.”

It was a great camp in a beautiful setting along the Atlantic Ocean. Half of each weekday was devoted to faith-building activities. Afternoons were reserved for fun on the beach.

I enjoyed the camp week. All the kids did too. There were many “good connections” made. But one memory stands out that I particularly ponder still, with some uneasiness and ambivalence.

During the weeks the kids learned several songs. One song was intended to encourage positive self-esteem because we know that God doesn’t make junk. The little ditty was called, “I’m Unique and Unrepeatable.” The words were pretty simple. First verse: “I’m unique and unrepeatable, I’m unique

and unrepeatable, I’m glad to be me.” The second verse: “You’re unique and unrepeatable, you’re unique and unrepeatable, I’m glad that you’re you!” Third verse: “We’re all unique and unrepeatable; all unique and unrepeatable; all unique and unrepeatable, be glad that we are!”

It was fun, upbeat, easy-to-learn song to sing. And, all in all, back then, it sounded pretty innocent to me. Yet I have since wondered if in singing it as we did every morning our “Good Connections” Camp wasn’t parlaying a message to our young participants that was going to make it harder for some or all of them to make good connections in life later on. Hear me out, here. While it’s important to recognize individuality and diversity in our human life shared and to be comfortable with who we are, we can go overboard to the point where it creates problems for maintaining any strong, positive sense of community and the vital the institutions necessary to support cooperation and togetherness.



That “Good Connections” ditty up in distant Ferry Beach wasn’t something sung in isolation either. On the radio in those very same days, “Old Blue Eyes” Frank Sinatra was crooning a big hit, “I Did It My Way.” (Can some of you remember that? Today, I sometimes hear Sinatra’s song still played in funeral homes.) Meanwhile, also getting into act back then, the Burger King fast food chain, which was trying to outdo its big rival MacDonald’s, had its own catchy jingle about holding the pickle and lettuce and “having it your way” because “special orders don’t upset us.”

To be sure, these were all different ditties heard in completely separate venues. But they were playing many of the same notes about uniqueness, unrepeatability, and doing our own thing. Essentially, they were celebrating individualism and an “each to his own” mentality. In retrospect, I have come to regard these notes high and low as symptoms of an entire society that in exalting diversity was fast discarding its Judeo-Christian heritage where community and working together has traditionally been more deeply respected and prized. Today, in the midst of all the chaos of our lingering COVID pandemic when so many want to be an authority onto themselves rather than listening to anyone else, let alone medical and public health authorities, we are reaping the whirlwind from ideas so innocuously, if not innocently, spread long ago.

In the Gospel according to John, Jesus declares: “Greater love has no one than this, but that someone should lay down their life for a friend.” (*John 15:13*) However, right now, in those settings where social distancing isn’t possible or reliable, some folks won’t even mask for another. And almost everywhere we see protests against any vaccination push for the protection of the many. Right and left, we see folks copping an attitude—“No one’s going to tell me what to do!” In the face of a contagious disease spread person-to-person through the air, grown men and women insist that what they choose to do is nobody else’s business. Is this rational? It certainly is not Christian in the caring, unselfish way that Jesus calls us to live. Indeed, Christianity has always taught that freedom should never be exercised without responsibility. In standing on our God-given rights, we still have a Christian duty to care about others and care for others. It’s unkind and arrogant to do otherwise.

Although at the Ferry Beach “Good Connections” Camp I was often leading the singing about being unique and unrepeatable, at home when I became a parent, I also sang some other tunes, metaphorically speaking. Along with my wife, Eileen, my goal as a parent was to civilize our young son through basic Christian values so that he wouldn’t behave like a barbarian. On the one hand, we wanted him to know that God loved him and we did too. Moreover, God had endowed him with particular gifts and talents, which are precious and special. On the other hand, we sought to make very clear to him that he was not the center of the universe and that he had a responsibility to tap his gifts and talents not only for his own benefit ahead, but also for the common good and the greater

good of this world. In short, as a Christian-hearted parent I saw it as my job to check any arrogance before it cropped up. Both my wife and I wanted our son to be a well-grounded, centered, human being without becoming self-centered. In this effort we were just trying to mirror Jesus as he trained and equipped his own apostles and disciples.

On this score our gospel passage from Mark is very revealing, isn't it? As our gospel passage opens, Jesus has been traveling across the dusty roads of Galilee. He's keeping his head down. His apostles and disciples too. Why? Because Jesus wants to have some time apart to talk with his apostles and disciples who are going to have to lead the budding church community after he meets his destiny on Calvary's cross. (*Mark 9:31-32*) They all pause at Capernaum. Behind closed doors, sitting down, Jesus picks up the conversation.

Apparently, Jesus on the road has just overheard his own chosen apostles arguing among themselves as to who is "the greatest" and deserves the signal honor of sitting at his right hand when God's kingdom comes. Mincing no words, Jesus sets them straight. "Anyone who wants to be first," he explains, "must be the very last, and servant of all." (*Mark 9:35*) To illustrate his point, Jesus then draws a child of the Capernaum household into his own arms and adds: "Whoever welcomes one of these little ones in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me." (*Mark 30:37*) In another telling of the same story that we find in the Matthew's gospel, Jesus adds that "Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven." (*Matthew 18:4*)

What Jesus seeks to make absolutely clear to his apostles is that their focus should be on helping others, rather than advancing themselves. Even the spiritual welfare of a child, which might seem unimportant to many of that day, should be dear to them. Consistent with everything else that he taught, Jesus' command for his apostles is that they should check their egos and be ready to sacrifice for others. Only such unselfishness will make it possible for them to walk in the full grace and favor of God.

Of course, with this child in his arms, Jesus offers us a positive example of what it means to be caring and unselfish, setting all arrogance and self-centeredness aside. That same kind of example shines in everything else he does he well. The Apostle Paul was right on mark when he noted that Jesus, though he had the nature of God, did not insist on any special rights and freedom or run around exalting himself. Instead, "of his own free will he gave up all that he had and took the nature of a servant." Paul goes on to note that Jesus remained "humble and walked the path of obedience" to God's truth "all the way to death—his death on the cross." (*Philippians 2:6-8*)

Where is that servant spirit today? Ironically, and most disturbing to me, we even have professed Christian communities today that are exalting personal rights and freedom over and against any sense of mutual responsibility to uphold the well-being of the many. Rather than encouraging personal sacrifice they demand “religious exemptions” from responsibility to the wider community. Rejecting any call to sacrifice, they have become—as Jesus criticized in his Sermon on the Mount—rather “like salt which has lost its saltiness,” which is “no good except to be thrown out and trodden underfoot by men.” (*Matthew 5:13*) Given over to an extreme, community-imperiling individualism that borders on hedonism, where personal pleasure and happiness become paramount, they have ceased to be the inspiring and leading “light to the world” that Jesus expects all of his true followers to be. (*Matthew 5:14*)

If there is any lingering question or doubt about the way that Jesus would have us behave in troubled times like our own, we might listen to what the Apostle James has to say. In his New Testament letter to his fellow early Christians, Jesus’ half-brother rhetorically asks: “Who is wise and understanding among you?” (*James 3:13*) James then firmly answers that those who act with humility are the truly wise and faithful. And humility in his book goes hand-in-hand with being pure, peace-loving, considerate, and full of mercy. All this produces the moral and spiritual righteousness that should be everyone’s goal. (*James 3: 13, 17-18*) Conversely, selfishness, arrogance, and greed are in James’s words “unspiritual and demonic”—in other words, of the devil. (*James 3:15*) They sow “disorder and every evil practice.” (*James 3:16*)

The Apostle James’ final advice is pretty blunt. To all in every time and place who have ears to hear, he declares:

“Submit yourselves, then to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners; and purify your hearts, you double-minded.” (*James 4:7-8*)

The double-mindedness that James condemns is just another word for hypocrisy. Yes, James is saying here that those who profess Jesus Christ but continue to be selfish and self-centered are hypocrites, sinning against God and contributing to moral and social mayhem. In our personal choices in response to the COVID pandemic or any other problem afflicting our wider community, any sincere Christian faith should very differently move us to follow and submit to God’s way for us, rather than give ourselves over to the “devices and desires of our own hearts” where we talk and act like know-it-alls based on something we just read off the internet.

This pandemic crisis and so much else currently besetting our nation is revealing the character of citizens for better and worse. In many cases, amid the rampant paranoia and fear that’s surfacing, it’s not a pretty picture, nor a faithful one. Invariably, I go back

to that summer camp ditty about being “unique and unrepeatable” that I used to sing with camp kids. Did I along with Frank Sinatra and Burger King and who knows who else, contribute to our present mess and malaise? God forgive me, if I did. God forgive us any and all in whatever part we have unsuspectingly played in allowing such a selfish breed of individualism to flourish at the cost of how Jesus Christ calls us to daily live.

None of what I am saying is meant to deride Individual talents and independent thinking. Both should be nurtured and cultivated. So should positive self-esteem for our children and ourselves. In fact, as Christians we should show respect for everyone amid the differences that are always going to persist among us. But selfishness in the guise of any extreme individualism is still wrong, especially when it tears at the fabric of community, as it does today. Humility is the best brake on selfishness, preventing individualism from going dangerously amuck. Consequently, even as we may question what’s up and work for change, humility will always remain an essential Christian virtue, helping us keep in check hurtful words and actions that violate the spirit of Christ and in the end don’t serve our present or future well.

In all that we say and do, may we cherish humility as an indispensable Christian virtue. May we walk humbly through this life, thereby keeping close to the personal witness and example of Jesus Christ, who promises us the reward of heaven in the next. (*Matthew 5:5*) **Amen.**