Sermon

 2-17-13

 First Christian Church

 Paris, Kentucky

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 Title: Humility

Scripture: 1 Peter 5:6

 Humble yourselves therefore, under the mighty hand of God, so that in due time He may exalt you.

 Micah 6:8:

 He has told you, O mortal, what is good, and what does the Lord

 require of you but to do justice, to love kindness and to walk humbly

 with your God.

 Matthew 16:4

 Jesus said, "Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the

 kingdom of heaven."

 Colossians 3:12

 As God's chosen one, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility meekness and patience.

The word of God has been delivered from a pulpit in this sanctuary for over 143 years. Preacher after preacher, deacon after deacon, lay person, visiting pastors, evangelists, testimonies given, souls saved, songs sung and prayers prayed. Hopefully, most have submitted to the movement of God's spirit in their soul, listened carefully to God's word and observed the rich texture of life around them to know what needed to be said and how it would be talked from this spot in this room.

Some days, if they are like me, these pastors, evangelists and deacons, haven't been up to the task, but they came anyway, like many of you do when you go to work even when you are sick or depressed or sad or unprepared. Perhaps on those days, that was really the message, "He came anyway. She is overcoming the exigencies of life and stands before us -- faithful." There is something that will preach. Faithfulness when you are tired or troubled or weak.

The message does not come to a pastor on the proverbial mountaintop. Oh, it can come in a moment of spiritual ecstasy, but not usually. Most of the time, the pastor keeps eyes and ears open, listens to mind, heart and soul, prays and studies. There, in the mess which is life, and the Word which belongs to God, is a busy intersection with all sorts of possibilities. Which way do I go? God leads, but I have to put it into words and say it aloud.

I am limited in what I can do. There are certain things I will not do.

 1. I will not use the pulpit to pick on one particular sin that plagues people.

 Preachers sometimes take cheap shots at people whose sin is in

 the minority and someone representing that sin may not even be in

 the audience. Most preachers won't offend someone they love by

 picking on them from the pulpit.

 2. If, when preparing the sermon, I begin to think of one person or family in the

 congregation as the prime example for this, I will erase the computer screen

 and start over. Now you might say, "They need to hear what you have to

 say," and as soon as you would say that, I would say, "That is exactly why

 I don't preach to one person. Everyone else thinks they are off the hook."

Preachers are seed planters. You know the text. "Some seed fell on the rock and were burned up by the sun. Some seed fell among the thorns and were choked out. Some seed feel on fertile ground and bore good fruit." Jesus said to scatter the seed and have faith. We don't have much choice. So we preach, pastor and serve, scattering seeds among those who come. Most often, we do not know where the seeds fell on good soil. I am guessing it is not necessarily on the person who shakes your hand and says, "Good sermon." The seed might have fallen on good soil there. Rather, it is probably the person the person who says to themselves, "Wow, I never thought of that. Maybe I need to try a little harder." You may never know.

Not long ago, the church received a check for $5,000. It came from the estate of a woman in her fifties, who was in the youth group I led as a layperson at my home church in Somerset. She had called me on the phone about six months before her death and asked me to do her funeral. She had been sick for years. But until that point, I hadn't been in contact with her or thought much of her, for, oh, 40 years. Really! A seed was planted somewhere and grew. But you know, as hard as I tried, I couldn't think of what I had done for my church to be the beneficiary of such generosity. Still can't. Not a hint. That is not humility. I just can't think of what would have stuck with her for forty years and that in the interim period, she hadn't come up with 20 causes more dear to her heart than a church she had never visited.

This gift humbled me and scared the daylights out of me. I must choose my words and my actions carefully, for they are powerful beyond measure. We are not trifling up here. Somedays we may think we are. But we are releasing the celestial force of the living God the immeasurable power of the Holy Spirit and leading people to another dimension of existence through salvation in Christ.

It can't be us. We don't have that power. We might want to pretend that we are pretty good with words, the turn of a phrase, a cool story. But it can't be us. We are poor preachers, reworking words worn like an old shoe, retelling stories written a couple of thousand or more years ago, that many of you have heard dozens of times.

We are most powerful when we submit ourselves body, mind and soul to the living God and his Son, Jesus. Since we have nothing on our own, we only have something when we are willing to humble ourselves and listen for the still small voice of God. Humility is the only thing that allows God to speak through us.

Now, you might be thinking, "Humility, meekness, submission, confession, repentance -- they surely cannot accomplish much alone. If you said this, you may be right. But combine humility with the power of love or mercy or justice and...well, let me tell you a story.

There was a man who said, "To our bitterest opponents we say, 'We shall match your capacity to inflict suffering by our capacity to endure suffering. We shall meet your physical force with soul force...Be ye assured that we will wear you down by our capacity to suffer.'"

There was a man who said, "**We must in strength and humility meet hate with love."** Who can deny the force of those words. Combine them with the willingness to suffer until justice is done, and there is a force which will change the world.

This man went on to say, "Of course, this is not practical. Life is a matter of getting even, of hitting back, of dog eat dog. Am I saying that Jesus commands us to love those who hurt and oppress us? Do I sound like, most preachers -- idealistic and impractical? May be in some distant utopia, you say that idea will work., but not in the cold world in which we live. For the salvation of a nation and the salvation of mankind, we must follow another way."

There was another man who came before the first man who said, "Love your neighbor as you love yourself." This other man said crazy things like, "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." And maybe it isn't just enemies, but people who just aggravate the fool out of us, who make the same mistakes over and over, those people with good intentions who don't get it quite right.

We might say in answer to these texts on humility, "Hey, I am beat down, run down, down and out and low down. How will humility serve to make my life better?

Well, here it is. Got your pencils ready? It won't. Alone, humility will not solve anything. You can sit there all day and be humble and it won't do any good. But if you will do what that man said earlier in the sermon, speaking from seeds planted maybe fifty years ago and being spoken into this sanctuary today, "We must in strength and humility meet (he said hate, I will substitute, "trouble") trouble with love," then we have something.

Humility allows the fresh word of God to nourish the seed of love. Humility gets me out of the way of myself. I am my own worst enemy sometimes. How about you? Jesus has so much to say to us, here and now, not somewhere and at some future time. Here is what I wrote in our church newsletter this week about humility:

"Just don't make a big deal out of yourself, because in God's eyes you are a really big deal and God doesn't need your help assigning value to you." You are a big deal. Created in God's image. His child. He is your God. You are his people.

The man I spoke of earlier, knew this lesson. While he might have surrounded himself with armed body guards, he took the road less traveled, the road of non-violence. He faced a society armed to the teeth with guns, billy clubs, fire hoses and angry dogs. Following his faith in Jesus, he knew he did not need weapons to witness. He said he would like to live a long life, but that didn't matter now. Can you hear the soft footsteps, the power of humility descending and justice arising? He was sick that night and almost didn't come to speak.

But he took a nation to the mountaintop that night. He achieved it with self-deprecating speech, which even allowed that he did not know whether he would make it to the promised land with the congregation gathered. He closed by saying with such force and truth that the timbers of injustice in this country could be heard cracking from Carolina to California, "Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord."

The next day, in the final and most cherished act of a disciple of the living Christ, he gave his life for the movement of freedom and justice in the United States. Humbled himself unto death...and in that final humbling, so final that we would never hear his words and wisdom again, doors flung open, hearts of stone were shattered and, as tragic as it was, his death reminded us all of this legacy of love which began at the foot of the cross.

The power of humility -- I can't force you, but I won't go away -- combined with strength and love, changed things and is still changing things.

Humility is why we sit here together this morning.

If the force of humility combined with strength and love, is enough to move a nation to name streets, schools and community centers in just about every community after this man, then maybe you and I can be humble enough to face our injustices and overcome them as well.