



CHURCH of
the SAVIOUR

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“Walk Humbly”

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Romans 12:9-18 (CEB)

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Modern Worship

I grew up in a little town called Midvale in rural Tuscarawas County. Actually, to call it a town is generous. It is an incorporated village of about 500 residents. There are two traffic lights – one alternating and the other just a flashing light. There are two churches: one Roman Catholic, the other United Methodist, the church my dad served from 1978 to 1987. When I was a kid, there was one store in town, the kind of place you went when you forgot something and didn't have time to go back to the *real* grocery store, or you just wanted a quick snack and weren't overly concerned whether the expiration date had already passed. There was a school, a post office, three bars, a volunteer fire department, and most exciting for me as a kid, a ¼ mile asphalt speedway that held stock car and late model races on Saturday nights.

It was a great place to grow up. Everyone knew just about everyone, which I thought was great when I was a kid. (I hadn't yet lived long enough to know that isn't always a good thing.) That little town didn't have much going for it, and most of us who lived there were okay with that. Which is why it became a running joke after one of our neighbors returned from vacation with a T-shirt they'd found that read, “It's hard to be humble when you're from Midvale.”

Our challenge from Micah 6:8 is to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God. Though we've discovered that God's idea of *justice* is more expansive than ours and that biblical *kindness* involves more than just being nice, practicing *humility* may be the most difficult of the three.

The truth is, sometimes it's hard to be humble, no matter where you're from. As our lives grow outward and upward, we may accumulate a few accomplishments and accolades. We might start to feel pretty good about ourselves and how far we've come. That can be a good thing, as long as we don't forget where we came from, how we got there, and who helped us along the way. I think that's why God made it a point to remind the people of Israel at various points along their journey that they hadn't always been all that special, at least not in the eyes of the world. *Treat the immigrant or stranger among you as one of your own people*, reads Exodus 23:9, ***because you were once strangers in the land of Egypt***. God's commandment helped them remember their roots, the way they had been enslaved, treated as outsiders or inferiors, and to make sure they offered a better welcome than they had received. Remembering our past keeps us humble and can make us more fully engaged in the present.

I have a colleague in ministry who is tremendously successful. He serves a large church, is highly regarded by others around the connection, and holds a PhD from a prestigious university. He has a great family and the kind of life many people long for. But in order to open the door to advancement, he had to close an earlier chapter in his life. He grew up with an alcoholic father who emotionally manipulated the family, leaving them impoverished. When he left for college, he swore he'd never look back. He cut off contact with his parents and most contact with his siblings, too. Most people who know him have no idea. Years of therapy have helped him deal with the trauma of his youth, but it hasn't erased the past. A few years ago, when he was receiving his doctoral hood in a ceremony at his church, a few well-intentioned church members decided to surprise him by flying in his family. It was a debacle. A day that should have been filled with celebration and joy instead left him shaking, emotionally raw, and nearly unable to speak. No one who hasn't lived through that kind of childhood can fully appreciate the complexity of his situation. But I wonder how things might be different if instead of working so hard to distance himself from his past, he was transparent about it with himself and those who love him. Could facing those memories help him be more at peace and be a gift to others who've traveled similar paths? Remembering where we come from and how we got here can be more humbling than we want, but the cost of forgetting (or trying to forget) is high.

I've chosen as the focus text for today a passage from Paul's Letter to the Romans, one we've used often to help frame our mission and identity over the past few years. Paul has a lot to say to the church at Rome, a church he didn't start and had never visited.

His initial instructions here in chapter 12 are about internal relationships in the church: *Love without pretending. Treat each other as members of your own family. Outdo each other in showing honor to one another. Encourage each other in faith.* But as the passage goes on, his concern shifts from internal relationships to hospitality with those outside the church. Paul already knew that a church's identity is defined in relation to how it understands the world around it. Any authentic faith

community that seeks to be faithful to its calling in its particular location must give careful attention to how it sees its neighbors and relates to them. So, he offers this guidance: *Consider everyone as equal. Don't think you're better than anyone else. Don't spend your time currying favor with people who are popular or influential; instead, invest in people who have no status. Don't think you're so smart. Show respect to the people around you. Be curious and listen, even to those who think differently than you.* (my paraphrase)

At the time Paul was writing, the fledgling Christian community was still a movement on the margins. Though the church was growing rapidly, they were still seen as outsiders, a small minority in a world of diverse religious expression. They weren't yet considered much of a threat to the Roman establishment – that would take shape over the next few decades. So, calling for them to adopt a posture of humility doesn't seem like a big ask. When you're not highly regarded, it would be audacious to think more highly of yourself than you ought. *It's hard to be humble when you're from Midvale.*

But the posture of humility was profoundly counter-cultural. In Roman society, humility was not considered virtuous the way it is today. In fact, it was scandalous to debase oneself by being humble in the presence of “equals” or “lessers.” Humility was for slaves, not citizens. Paul was instructing the Roman church to go against the norms of society, where power was leveraged and domination was the way to get things done. But his instruction is more than just “don't be like those people.” It was a caution for the collective body, in the present and the future, who they would become as the movement grew and how they were to reach new people. In any system, there's a temptation to go along with the crowd, to try to “fit in” and become part of the accepted social fabric. Think junior high school and the desire to be seen as part of the “in” crowd (and the storyline of pretty much every adolescent movie). Being counter-cultural by refraining from leveraging power and influence meant that the Jesus movement would be slow-growing, mostly remaining on the margins.

Of course, that changed when Constantine converted and declared Christianity the official religion of the empire. Suddenly, Christian faith moved from the margins to the center, from the outsiders to the dominant religious expression. That put an end to violent persecution against Christians in the Roman world and propelled a global movement of church building, missionary outposts, hospitals, and schools. But it also led to some pretty dark chapters in our story: the crusades, the inquisition, subjugation of native peoples, suppression of indigenous cultures, and others. How might things have turned out differently if Paul's words had been remembered in imperial and ecclesial structures of authority, if the message had remained focused on humility rather than power and domination?

Though we consider ourselves far more enlightened today, we are not immune to the temptation of power and status. As the Christian faith loses influence and its place at the center of society, we may be drawn to conformity in other ways, seeking popularity or downplaying the counter-cultural nature of the Gospel to “get along.” We're especially vulnerable to losing our way when movements around us appear to generally support our values. But in our quest to be relevant and influential, we can easily lose track of our calling. We may reduce Christian faith to simply “doing good things” and skip over the transformation Christ wants us to experience in ourselves and our world. If we're not careful and prayerful, we can be lured into supporting a “Christian” agenda that is really a political movement attempting to leverage an influential voting bloc. We can be shaped more by American values than Christian values, reflecting a culture of dominance, privilege, accumulation, and consumption. Hardly the mission of Jesus or the reason he gave his life and rose again.

It's hard to be humble when you're from Nazareth.

How can we embrace the kind of humility Micah says God requires, the kind of humility Paul urged us to have? One way would be to make Romans 12 a theme for our lives. What would happen if we read these words every day, reflecting on the teachings of scripture and striving to live the way Paul described? If we did that and took it seriously, we would experience profound change. I encourage you to print out this passage and put it somewhere you'll see it regularly over the next few weeks as a reminder. Follow daily the *Rooted* devotional guide you'll receive this afternoon. But as I read Paul's words, I come up with no fewer than 20 separate injunctions – great teaching, but a lot to remember. So, at the risk of oversimplifying Paul, I'll (humbly) offer three things that get at the heart of Paul's instructions:

Give people the benefit of the doubt. Don't assume the worst in people, even if that appears merited at first glance. Instead, be generous in assessing other people's motives. When we disagree with someone, we often find ourselves making judgments not just about their actions or ideas, but their underlying motives. Rushing to judgment causes us to dismiss people, something Jesus never did and precisely the behavior Paul warned us against.

Make these *four simple words* part of your vocabulary: *I could be wrong.* We're obsessed with “rightness” in our world right now. But even when we get it right, what we *don't* know would fill volumes. It might not play well in a televised debate, but it would be a more honest posture to modify even our best idea with the qualifier, “I could be wrong.” In a world that

celebrates the loud, we can reflect the biblical value of humility by being less self-assured, listening for God's voice more than broadcasting our own.

Finally, *adopt the mind of Christ*. In his letter to the Philippians, Paul urges us to "let the mind of Christ be in you." He describes the humility of Christ – who is one with God but emptied himself of privilege and status, humbling himself by becoming one of us and being obedient to the call of God's grace even when it cost him his life. Paul says that's the way we are to live, too – setting aside any notions of privilege in pursuit of Christ's mission. We aren't called to build impressive structures or help win elections or wave banners of triumph or center ourselves in seats of power. We're called to humbly follow Jesus, bringing good news of God's grace that restores and redeems us, and to transform the world through that grace and love.

No one famous ever came from Midvale, as far as I know. But it's where most of my childhood memories took root, the place that helped shape my understanding of the world and the people in it. I don't ever want to forget where I came from or the life that I experienced there. Where are you from? What places and stories and people shaped you? How do you carry those experiences with you?

It's hard to be humble, especially when true humility isn't highly valued. But it's Christ's way: *the only way* he lived and the way he taught us to live. What does the Lord require of us, but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with God? Let those be the values that shape us and identify us as God's people. Amen.