

So, I have to begin my sermon this morning by extending an apology to the many cat lovers I offended last week. I have to admit that I do love cats. I've had many cats in my life that I adore and the debate between cats and dogs is a false dichotomy because they're both great. So, please, my cat lover friends, stop sending me hate mail. Actually, it has been a humbling experience to receive the many good arguments people have made about why cats are just as good, if not better than dogs. And this has been an informing experience for me. It's actually informed my sermon today, which is on the topic of humility, because we all know that dogs are more humble than cats.

In all seriousness, I believe that, right now, more than ever, the Christian virtue, the scriptural call to humility, is something to be passionately embraced by all of us. Humility will help us in our relationships and conversations. It deepens our relationship with God and it grounds our sense of calling and purpose. Humility enables us to ease the discord we experience with others. From a biblical perspective, humility is not only about having a modest view of ourselves, but every calling continually our limitedness in contrast to God's Holy infiniteness. This is why Jesus says that it is the meek, it is the humble who are blessed. They enjoy a childlike trust with God and recognize that all they do is a gift from God. In today's epistle, we read this call to humility from Saint Paul, who writes in the 12th chapter in his letter to the Romans, "For by the grace given to me, I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment."

Of course, that isn't the way of the world. The world, our society, does not encourage us to think of ourselves and of our judgments soberly or to temper our opinions of ourselves in this humble way. But this calling to humility goes hand-in-hand with Paul's opening passage of this passage, which he says, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds." Be transformed, not conformed. And one of the

quickest routes to transformation is humility. One simple way for us to embrace a sober and humble attitude about ourselves is to be invited to remind ourselves of the dumb things we all have done. Now, this is not to kick ourselves. This isn't to punish ourselves or put ourselves down. It's simply to hold lightly to any sense of superiority we may be tempted to embrace.

So, let me give you an example from my own life. It's an event that I actually remind myself of whenever I'm tempted to think more highly of myself than I ought. It happened years ago when I was a teenager. A boy that I had a crush on invited me to get ice cream after a football game. I got into his car and sat down and he handed me a tiny little spray bottle of breath freshener, strawberry. I was a little surprised, but I thought maybe it was a hint. So, I suppose I should use it. And I sprayed it directly into my mouth and instantly realized it was not breath freshener. It was air freshener, like Lysol.

My mouth was on fire and he suddenly turned his head and looked at me wide-eyed and said, "Oh no, did you just spray that in your mouth?" I was so horrified. I was so embarrassed. I said, "No," without, of course, considering my answer, because at that point, I had to spend the rest of the drive pretending that everything was fine while my mouth continued to burn like it was in excruciating pain. Thank God for ice cream. Now, I survived that embarrassment. But that event has been my go-to reminder, ever since, not to think too highly of myself. I mean, I sprayed Lysol in my mouth. Obviously, I've done a lot of dumb things since then and much dumber things since then. But that event always makes me laugh at myself. And laughing at ourselves is important so that we don't take ourselves too seriously in life. When we take ourselves too seriously, we become intolerable to the people around us. And honestly, life is just less enjoyable. Frankly, pride is not a lot of fun for anybody.

Another way we can embrace humility is by seeking out what is insightful and useful in the opinions of

others, especially those with whom we disagree. Once we start making a habit of listening for any gem of wisdom that others bring, we can find ourselves understanding people better. We can find that we become more effective at communicating with them and finding even common ground. This is especially important in a community like the church, but also for all of us within wider society. So, think, right now, about a group of people that you find it hardest to listen to, and then look. Look for something in their messaging that might be true, or that, at least, could teach you something you might not have considered before.

Abraham Lincoln was a great example of this type of humility. There are many stories about him doing this, but there's one story that's told that, during the civil war, someone reported to Lincoln that Edwin Stanton, who was one of the president's cabinet members had referred to Lincoln as a fool, a fool. And to that, Mr. Lincoln replied, "Well, I must check into that, for I've found that he's usually correct in his judgments." Looking for what might be true or insightful with those we disagree requires and teaches us humility, to be transformed and not conformed.

A third way to embrace and cultivate humility is to contemplate the incredible grace of God, to look at all that you've done and see God's hand at work in it, gifting you with the grace you needed and bringing the right people and the circumstances together in your life. One of my favorite stories about this kind of humility comes from Samuel Morse. Morse was the son of a minister in New England. He was born shortly after George Washington became president. He went to Yale and then went to England to become a painter. And his gift for art had become widely recognized, so much so that he was invited to go to Washington, D.C. to paint. And while he was away from home, painting, news arrived much too late that his wife had died. Morse was so heartbroken that he hadn't been able to see her before her death, but he gave up his artistic career in order to study a means of rapid communication over great

distances. He wanted to prevent something like that happening to anybody else.

Morse, as you may know, helped invent the Telegraph and Morse Code. He became incredibly famous and honored, and still he did not become proud. Instead, he wrote this, "The more I contemplate this great undertaking, the more I feel my own littleness, and the more I perceive the hand of God in it and how God has assigned to various persons their duties, God being the great controller, all others God's honored instruments. Hence, our dependence, first of all, on God, then on each other." No doubt that his dependence on God's grace and on others is what helped him to be so successful, to be transformed, not conformed.

My friends, we need God and we need each other. And scripture invites us to approach God and our neighbors with this deep sense of humility. It's okay that we make mistakes. We can learn from them. We can embrace those embarrassing moments as reminders to stay humble. And we can learn to listen to the voices of others, especially those with whom we disagree, in order to gain deeper insights about life and ourselves. And finally, when we take the time to see the way that God has worked in and through us throughout our lives, we will be filled with that gratitude and humility that will enable us to draw closer to God and each other. Not thinking of ourselves more highly than we ought, but with sober judgment by God's grace and find ourselves transformed, not conformed. Thanks be to God.