

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham  
“Claiming Our Identity: A Humble Church”

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Isaiah 54:4-8; 1 Corinthians 3:21-4:7

We knew we were better. It was in the water. It was in the air. Growing up in Texas we just knew that we were better than everyone else. We were the second largest state. We had four out of the top eleven cities in the nation. Our economy, if it were on its own, would be the tenth largest in the world, almost fifty-percent larger than Russia's. We have nine of the ten largest high school football stadiums in the nation, with average seating capacity of around 19,000. Two years ago, the largest oil discovery in the United States was made in west Texas, holding almost twenty-billion barrels of oil adding to Texas reserves which were around a third of proven reserves in the nation. We were also the only state to have ever been an independent nation. Finally, and above all of these, we have Willie Nelson and Tex-Mex food. It was hard growing up in Texas and not believing that we were essentially better than everyone else.

I offer you that take on Texas, not because I think it's better, but because it can give you some idea of how the Corinthians felt about being Corinthians. Corinth was just better. It was better because it was founded by Julius Caesar himself. It was better because it was wealthier and larger than any other community in Greece. It was better because it was a major link in the trade routes across the Roman Empire. It was better because its massive stadium, with seating capacity of almost 18,000 played host to numerous dramas and musical attractions. And the biennial Isthmian Games, which were second only to the Olympics themselves, were held there. The city also contained great temples including one to Aphrodite. Finally, they were cultured and a seat of great teaching and wisdom. This meant that they were better than people like Paul, a Jew from a dusty and distant land. This meant that they did not have to listen to him, because he was not their equal. They, and their local leaders, were simply better and everyone knew it.

It was against this backdrop that Paul wrote his letter, and in so doing, decided he needed to deflate their egos and given them a crash course in humility. He wanted to do so not only because they were refusing to listen to him but because it was tearing their church apart. This course had two lessons, the first of which was on equality.

The heart of pride is a sense that we are better than anyone else, very much like those of us who grew up in Texas, knew that we were better than any other state. What Paul tells them though is that every other Christian, including Paul, can have everything that they have. Here is how he puts it, in a rather Pauline, sarcastic manner. *“So, let no one boast in human leaders. For all things are yours, whether Paul, or Apollos, or Cephas or the world or life or death or the*

*present or the future-all belong to you, (but here's the twist) and you belong to Christ and Christ belongs to God.*" In other words, all those things that you think make you and your leaders great... may be and actually are possessed by everyone else who follows Jesus. They have the same leaders, the same new life, the same escape from death, the same present with Jesus and the same future with God. And above all of this, they do not belong to their charismatic leaders but to Jesus and to God. What Paul is telling them is that being in Christ is the great equalizer; that there is equality which does not allow for one group of believers to get all puffed up with pride. Instead they are to remember that humility is a virtue they were to cultivate.

Lesson two is a lesson in gratitude. One of the fascinating things about being from Texas is that we act as if we were the ones who won independence from Mexico, or secretly put all that oil in the ground or off-shore in the Gulf of Mexico, or that we invented high school football. There is this great myth that we did it all ourselves, forgetting that all we had been given in the land and what is under it, was a gift from God. This is essentially what Paul tells the Corinthians. *"For who sees anything different in you? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you received it, why do you boast as if it were not a gift?"* All of those things that Paul told them they possessed, and other possessed as well...life, death, present and future are all given to them by God in Jesus Christ. They did not discover them. They did not build them. They did not earn them. They did not create them. They are all gift and the so the response ought not to be puffed up pride, but gratitude; a gratitude that gives thanks to God and connects them with Paul and one another. And thus, humility is a virtue they were to cultivate.

It would be easy to say that humility is a vanishing virtue, but as we can see from Paul it has never been a favorite virtue of the church or of society. Rather than being drawn to humility through equality and gratitude, human beings have been drawn to pride and power. Humility has been seen as weakness and surrender. Yet humility, is an essential quality for the life and work of the church. I say this because equality and gratitude make authentic Christian community possible. Without them, we are broken and divided. What I would like to do right now is to give you two challenges. First, turn and look around. As you do, remind yourself that each and every person you see is neither greater nor lesser than yourself. They are all a beloved child of God. Then when you leave here, see everyone you encounter in the same way, as one equal to you. Second, when the elements are passed, to fill your heart with gratitude for the gift of God's love and grace in Christ, and let that gratitude drive all that you do and all that you are. And by these two actions, allow yourself to live in humility, thus making possible, authentic community, here and in the world.