

An elusive virtue: Matthew 23:1-12; 1 Thessalonians 2:9-13

Let us imagine that humility was God's gift to Paul at his conversion.

by [Carter Heyward](#) in the [October 21, 2008](#) issue

Among spiritual qualities, why is humility one of the hardest to practice and yet probably the easiest to imitate? Why do so many politicians and clergy insist that they work not for themselves but for others—"not for myself, but for my country," not for my own interests but for what's right, not for me but for God?

Humility eludes us to the extent that we are afraid to notice how utterly common all humans are in the need for love, justice, compassion, health and dignity. If we are afraid of one another, afraid of finding ourselves in relation to others in the world—all others, not just those most like us—then our humility cannot be genuine. Such false humility is a pretense which masks a contempt for others. Just as Jesus takes the scribes and Pharisees to task for their false humility—doing good deeds to be seen by others—so too we need to be wary of political and religious leaders whose stories of self-sacrifice and love of God and country are often told in order to stir people's fear of those who seem alien.

Genuine humility is a gift from God which has nothing to do with downcast eyes, a misty voice and noble stories of sacrifice. Humility is, rather, living courageously in a spirit of radical connectedness with others, which enables us to see ourselves as God sees us: sisters and brothers, each as deeply valued and worthy of respect as every other. A truly humble man does not deny his self-interest but rather strives to realize how his interests are connected with the well-being of others, all others, not just those most like him. A genuinely humble woman does not seek to play herself down, as if she should be small and insignificant next to others, but rather is able to love herself fiercely and struggles to extend this strong love to all others by advocating for their dignity and well-being.

As the 2008 political season draws to a close and we move beyond the bombastic

rhetoric that has so bruised our sensibilities, we can't know for sure what Jesus would make of the electoral process in the U.S., a political and spiritual context very different from his own. On the basis of the biblical portrayal of the brother from Nazareth, however, we can imagine that Jesus would have little patience with the arrogance and the spinning that characterize public life in the U.S. and elsewhere, especially as people choose leaders. For the New Testament suggests that the greatest difference between Jesus and the religious leaders who opposed him was humility. Jesus had a strong sense of his place in the larger scheme of things in God's world. He knew that both he and his adversaries belonged to God. Jesus, not the scribes and Pharisees, had humility—the deep, embodied realization that we *all* belong to God. Jesus, in Thich Nhat Hahn's words, knew his “own true self,” which involved an acceptance of the spiritual fact that he was neither more important to God, nor less, than his neighbor. Humility was a strong, sacred source of Jesus' own capacity for faith, hope and love, and it is a source of ours as well.

Humility is the root of our compassion, our ability to suffer with one another, because we know ourselves as spiritual kin to everyone. No one is beneath us—or above us—in God's world. Let us imagine that humility was God's gift to Paul at his conversion. Let us imagine also that from that moment on, Paul recognized his own true self, his own place in God's world, and on that spiritual basis was able to become the first major Christian evangelist—traveling and teaching among communities filled with people whom he recognized as brothers and sisters. Moreover, like Jesus who preceded him and whose Christ-spirit accompanied him, the convert Paul realized that it is God's presence working through us that enables us to be humble, God's spirit working in us that empowers us to love, God's grace filling our hearts with compassion, and God's wrath stirring our anger not only at injustice and oppression but also at the false humility that drips from the lips of false prophets then and now.

The doctrine of the Trinity is one of the most elusive and—for many of us, to be honest—one of the least helpful Christian teachings. Yet it has become for me, over the years, one of the most energizing spiritual images. This little reflection on humility—as both a gift from God and a quality manifested by some humans like Jesus and the convert Paul—can serve as a springboard into our understanding the Trinity as a living spiritual resource.

When we meet one another in a spirit of humility, we are meeting God in one

another, that which makes us spiritual sisters and brothers; at the same time, others are meeting God in us. God is not only with us in our encounters but is also moving in us and through us. In other words, we and others are embodying God, through our humility, which comes from God; we are making God incarnate, here in the flesh, tangible and visible. This is what happened in and through Jesus in his time and place, and it is what it means now for us to be Christ's body in the world, to live in Christ, or in a christic spirit, or in God.