

Letting Go of Pride

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I want to begin this morning by reading an email I sent several years ago...I'll explain the context of the email in a minute, but for now, all I'll say is that it wasn't my best moment:

I have to say I'm disappointed that we can't adequately fund what we've declared a priority. When I agreed to do this, I made it very clear to our team that I'm coming off family leave, working full time at one church and part time at another, so my capacity is limited. Once again this dilemma is an example of us not reflecting ministry with the poor as a budgetary priority which means it's not truly a priority at all.

I was a little angry.

Here was the situation.

For those of you who do not, my ordination is actually in the United Methodist Church and I spent my first 15 years as a pastor in Birmingham, AL serving two Methodist churches that are a part of a larger conference. While we are a part of the UCC, we are also congregationalist which means the ultimate decision making body is with our own congregation; however, in the United Methodist world, churches have some autonomy but also work under the leadership of the conference and participate in conference wide initiatives and one of those collaborations was on a conference wide priority of ministry among people living in poverty.

That was something I was and am very passionate about. My pastoral career began as a pastor of a church in a low income community for ten years. That's why I was part of a team in our conference that worked to try to figure out how we can do more of that type of ministry and how we can do that ministry better and one part of that was offering a summer internship for college age kids who would live together in community and get experience working in different ministry settings that work with those living in poverty.

Now, here's where we get to the email. I was asked to direct the interns for the summer and I reluctantly agreed – I wasn't reluctant because I didn't support the program or enjoy working with young people. Rather, I was afraid I was taking on more than I could handle. But the other people on the team promised to help me if I needed them.

And pretty early on, I did need them. Only one of our interns had a car and I couldn't figure out how to transport all of them from where they were living to where they were working so I asked if we had any more money to hire someone to drive them and I was told we didn't. And that's when I sent this email that I just read to you.

Now, a few other things you should know – I sent that email to people who were on my team, people who were deeply committed to ministry with people living in poverty. And none of these people had the power to increase our budget to fund what I was asking. And yet, I

blamed them for it. The truth is I was feeling quite overwhelmed. And even though they had promised to help me if I needed it, my first reaction wasn't to ask for help, but to assign blame.

Thankfully, they did not respond with the same level of immaturity as I did. They actually helped me even though I hadn't asked for it. They were able to raise the money in a different way than the conference budget, and we got everything worked out. A day later, I had to send a different email:

I want to apologize for my email yesterday. My email came out of a place of frustration in that I'm worrying that I've taken on more than I can do well right now with a new baby, new roles at church, and this internship. That's something I need to be more self aware of. Next time, when I feel overwhelmed, I hope I will simply ask for help rather than write an accusatory email. Please forgive me.

If I had simply asked for help in the first place, they would have been more than happy to help me. In fact, they were even happy to help me when I blamed them for something that was not their fault. And through this whole experience I've learned that asking for help is not something that I do well, and my guess, is that I'm not alone. I think part of it is we live in a culture that values self-reliance. We are told that we should all be able to handle our business, that we shouldn't have to depend on others. And it's easy to internalize that message so that we think asking for help is a sign of weakness or incompetence. It really becomes a matter of pride.

Today we continue our Lenten sermon series on Letting Go with the theme of Letting Go of Pride. Saint Augustine, one of the most influential theologians in the history of Christianity, believed that pride is the root of all sin, saying, "There never can have been, and never can be and there never shall be any sin without pride."

But I need to qualify that a bit. There's quite a few ways of thinking about pride. I should first say, a lot of what we mean when we use the word pride is good. It's a very good thing to be proud of who you are. That's what things like gay pride parades are all about. All of us should be proud of who we are, proud of the family and community of which we are a part. I'm proud of my kids. I'm proud of the family that I come from. I take pride in where I came from. And I hope you do too. We can take pride in our work, meaning that we want to do it to the best of our ability.

These examples are not the kind of pride that Augustine links to sin. These examples are what good pride looks like and none of us need to let go of this kind of pride.

Another kind of pride, though, is the kind that makes us think we're better than others...sort of the same as arrogance. We can see this kind of pride in the older brother in Jesus' parable where he thought he was better than the little brother, or, at the very least, he didn't think the little brother deserved a second chance. We certainly need to let go of that kind of pride, but I think that's sort of obvious and also not really the kind of pride I'm talking about today.

For today, I want us to consider what it would mean to let go of the kind of pride that tells us we should be able to handle things on our own, that we should all be individually self-reliant, that we shouldn't need help.

In the Old Testament reading, Moses was about to wear himself out because he was taking on all of the responsibility of leading the people. Now we don't know for sure why Moses felt like he had to do that by himself – maybe it just didn't occur to him that he needed help, but my guess is that he had fallen prey to one of the lies in our heads – you are the only one who can do this. It all depends on you.

In the gospel reading, on the other hand, we have the story of the prodigal son who found himself at rock bottom before he was willing to seek help – literally eating food alongside pigs. Again, we don't know his motivation for why it took him so long to get help, but my guess is that he also had fallen prey to a lie – you are not worthy of being helped.

I think for most of us what prevents us from asking for help usually boils down to either believing we are too important to need help or not good enough to deserve help. And both of those thoughts are lies.

Jethro, Moses' father in law tells him, "What you are doing is not good. ¹⁸ You will surely wear yourself out, both you and these people with you. For the task is too heavy for you; you cannot do it alone." Now there are all sorts of jokes we could make about how it's the in-laws that have a way of reminding us we're not as important as we think we are. But in this case, Moses needed that reminder. There are few things in life that any of us can do by ourselves. And there are even fewer things in life where we are the only ones who can do them well. The moment we start thinking that it all depends on us is the moment we've made an idol out of ourselves and the moment we need someone to tell us, like Jethro told Moses, "You can't do it alone. You need help."

In the gospel reading, it is the father who reminded the prodigal of his worthiness. While the son finally worked up the courage to go home and ask for help, he dared not do so as a son – saying instead that he only wanted to be treated as a servant. But the father wouldn't hear it. No matter what the son had done, he was still the father's son and no bad decision could change that. Friends, even when our need for help is the result of bad decisions on our part, we are still worthy of receiving help. Some of the most courageous people I know are addicts who've chosen to ask for help and begin the process of recovery. And the truth is we have all made bad decisions, we have all done things that have put us in difficult situations...just like I did when I sent that email. Messing up doesn't make us unworthy of being helped. Messing up simply means we are human.

A number of years ago, I heard a prayer at a youth retreat. I don't know who originated the prayer, but it's become profoundly important to me and it's simply this, "God, help me to see myself just as I am...nothing more and nothing less." Perhaps that prayer is the first step in

learning to let go of the belief that we all have to be self reliant– none of us are too important to need help and none of us are too unimportant to deserve help.

So, O God, from now on, may we all see ourselves exactly as we are...no more and no less.