

17B 2021

This time in history is proving to be challenging.

People are feeling on edge.

We have been delivered many lessons in humility—we cannot live as gods controlling the environment, but must find a way to live with the environment.

We are unable to vanquish pathogens as readily as we would like.

We cannot alter societies to accord with our own values.

In other words, we do not always get our way.

We are not in charge.

Our humbling is accompanied by a certain amount of depression.

This puts clergy in a difficult position.

We want both to help people to understand the world theologically and we want to encourage them, to lift them up.

Sometimes it is difficult to achieve both, at least in the short term.

Today, I will first offer theological context to our humbling and then will leave you with something positive at the end.

First, a little perspective.

There are and always have been those who worship power.

They may even call it God.

We see an example of this when the pharisees and scribes accuse Christ and his disciples of eating with defiled hands.

The leaders do this under the guise of defending the sacred traditions of the elders.

Their motivation is, however, not really tradition.

It is power.

The pharisees and scribes are attempting to turn people against Christ because he threatens their own social standing that provides them, among other things, financial comfort.

Just like the pharisees and scribes 2000 years ago, *we* have many ways of concealing power, of wrapping it in righteous concern.

This is why, in pastoral care, we say that the issue is not the issue.

There is something behind the presenting complaint.

One common way to distract from the real issue is, for example, to claim that we want to protect the children.

In the long-running animated television series, *The Simpsons*, every time the people of Springfield discuss a challenging topic, the pastor's wife, Helen Lovejoy, pipes up shrilly, "Won't somebody please think of the children?!"

The Simpsons makes it clear that such a tactic is mere deflection.

In fact, if one really cares about the children, then one engages in a healthy discussion of the issues at hand rather than attempting to shut down discourse through distraction.

It is a power tactic, an attempt to manipulate emotionally in order to get one's way, much like the pharisees' defense of the traditions of the elders.

If we keep our eyes open, we can find many examples of such behavior in our day.

Theologically, when we choose power over love, we put ourselves in the place of God.

I thought about this when I read a disturbing article in a British online publication about the Taliban beating to death and cutting into pieces a young man “to demonstrate what we do to gay people.”

They then reportedly called his boyfriend's cellphone and said they were searching for him and his other friends, as well, in order to do the same.¹

Inspiring terror is a supreme act of power.

It might be presented as following a religious doctrine, as righteousness, but this is exactly the kind of thing that Christ taught us to avoid.

We are to be humble before God.

He teaches us to go forth in peace.

Those who accept our peace are a blessing.

1 https://consent.yahoo.com/v2/collectConsent?sessionId=1_cc-session_11a29d75-3963-4393-b7c6-2e09e3e3ecb5d

When we encounter people who do not, we walk away and leave them to God.

The Taliban case is an extreme example, but we find the worship of power in every religion and culture.

People regularly put themselves in the place of God.

It is easy for us to feel superior when we hear such extreme tales as those of the Taliban, to condemn them with passion, but the more we focus on the sins of others, the less attentive we are to our own issues.

In fact, was not our own twenty-year attempt to impose a political culture on a different society also an act of hubris?

Were we not also playing God?

And now we are humbled.

Many focus on our failure, but for some, it was a fantastic success, as it made them, like the pharisees, very wealthy.

At this point, we should pray,

and when I say pray, I mean not only for the victims of violence, but for the perpetrators and benefactors, as well.

Otherwise, we are merely using prayer as a means of expressing our superiority.

We sound like the pharisee who prayed, “God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.”

Christ tells us it was not the pharisee, but the humble tax collector who humbly confessed his weaknesses that was justified that day.

We cannot grow spiritually as long as we are focused on the faults of others.

A real spiritual journey starts with honesty about ourselves.

That spiritual growth greatly accelerates when we are able to identify for ourselves the things that drive us to seek power, make us want to *be* God rather than to submit humbly to God.

Once we identify this, we can start to free ourselves from our delusions and begin working together with others.

Our task here is to learn how to be the body of Christ, to cooperate in mutual support and affection, treating others as we would wish to be treated.

Once we achieve humility before God, we can spread it to others by example.

You may feel that this step is unobtainable.

It can feel like our Christian values have little broader influence, but recent research suggests otherwise.

There is a tendency to think that the most influential people are those at the center of attention, like the Kardashians, but in reality, Damon Centola and Douglas Guilbeault found that such influencers only reach people who already agree with them.

When it comes to changing behavior, “. . . as prominent and revered as social influencers seem to be, in fact, they are unlikely to change a person’s behavior by example” they write, “and might actually be detrimental to the cause.”²

This is because those who follow influencers expect more of the same.

If those influencers try to change their followers, they risk antagonizing them.

Centola and Guilbeault’s research suggests that, if we want to alter how people think, the best way is to “target small groups of people in the ‘outer edge’ or fringe of a network.”³

“Our big discovery,” Centola explains, “is that every network has a hidden social cluster in the outer edges that is perfectly poised to increase the spread of a new idea by several hundred percent. These social clusters are ground zero for triggering tipping points in society.”⁴

The more challenging the idea, the less effective people in the center were at spreading it.

2 <https://www.asc.upenn.edu/news-events/news/study-finds-surprising-source-social-influence>

3 <https://www.asc.upenn.edu/news-events/news/study-finds-surprising-source-social-influence>

4 <https://www.asc.upenn.edu/news-events/news/study-finds-surprising-source-social-influence>

Those on the periphery were more likely to be successful.

It is no wonder that Christ described us as leaven.

Christians are effective as outsiders who spread notions of justice and mercy throughout society.

We need not feel impotent.

So, we first must do our work to abandon our search for power, our attempts to be God.

That, in turn, sets us free to spread notions of grace.

We will not always be successful, but the world is much better off than if we ceased altogether.

Being humbled is not so bad if we learn from the experience.