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Worship Theme: Humility

### **Call to Worship:**

Every year around this time, I start to gather ideas for next year's worship themes. One of my favorite sessions is brainstorming with the covenant group leaders. Our covenant groups are small groups of 8-10 people, gathering for conversation and reflection about the worship themes, spiritual exercise, readings, and also just to share what's going on in their lives. You can sign up at any time, and about 150 or so people at Follen take part in these groups.

It was the covenant group leaders who expressed great interest in the topic of Humility, which became this month's theme. It is a good theme to have before us as many of our Christian friends—and some Unitarian Universalists, too—are in the season of Lent, a time of reflection and atonement.

A good definition comes from the late Senator John McCain: "Humility is the knowledge that you possess as much inherent dignity as anyone else, and not one bit more."

As we contemplate the meaning of humility in our lives, I offer these words from Rev. Barbara Brown Taylor:

"The hardest spiritual work in the world is to love the neighbor as the self—to encounter another human being not as someone you can use, change, fix, help, save, enroll, convince, or control,

but simply as someone who can spring you from the prison of yourself, if you will allow it. All you have to do is recognize another you “out there”—your other self in the world—for whom you may care as instinctively as you care for yourself. To become that person, even for a moment, is to understand what it means to die to yourself. This can be as frightening as it is liberating. It may be the only real spiritual discipline there is.”

May we companion each other in this frightening and liberating and humbling work.

Let us worship together.

**Reading: “Under One Small Star” by Wislawa Szymborska**  
*(Poems New and Collected)*

My apologies to chance for calling it necessity.  
My apologies to necessity if I’m mistaken, after all.  
Please, don’t be angry, happiness, that I take you as my due.  
May my head be patient with the way my memories fade.  
My apologies to time for all the world I overlook each second.  
My apologies to past loves for thinking that the latest is the first.  
Forgive me, distant wars, for bringing flowers home.  
Forgive me, open wounds, for pricking my finger.  
I apologize for my record of minuets to those who cry from the depths.  
I apologize to those who wait in railway stations for being asleep today at five a.m.  
Pardon me, hounded hope, for laughing from time to time.  
Pardon me, deserts, that I don’t rush to you bearing a spoonful of water.  
And you, falcon, unchanging year after year, always in the same cage,  
your gaze always fixed on the same point in space,  
forgive me, even if it turns out you were stuffed.  
My apologies to the felled tree for the table’s four legs.  
My apologies to great questions for small answers.  
Truth, please don’t pay me much attention.  
Dignity, please be magnanimous.

Bear with me, O mystery of existence, as I pluck the occasional thread from your train.

Soul, don't take offense that I've only got you now and then.

My apologies to everything that I can't be everywhere at once.

My apologies to everyone that I can't be each woman and each man.

I know I won't be justified as long as I live,  
since I myself stand in my own way.

Don't bear me ill will, speech, that I borrow weighty words,  
then labor heavily so that they may seem light.

## **Sermon: Humility**

“My apologies to great questions for small answers.”

What a great description of writing a sermon every week.

Symborska’s poem is funny, but it is also a confession. All the ways we fall short of perfection, every day, and in every way. So bear with me, O mystery of existence, as I pluck this thread from your train.

There is a popular song on the radio these days that goes,

I like that you’re broken

Broken like me

Maybe that makes me a fool

I like that you’re lonely

Lonely like me

I could be lonely with you

I love that song, and I wonder if the Shakers would have loved it too.

In the 1800s, there was a widespread belief that humankind was perfectible.

It was a Unitarian minister at King’s Chapel in Boston who said “We believe in The Fatherhood of God, The Brotherhood of Man, The Leadership of Jesus, Salvation by Character, and The Progress of Mankind, onward and upward forever.”

Some people joked that a more accurate statement of belief would have been “We believe in the fatherhood of God, the brotherhood of man, and the neighborhood of Boston.”

If humans were perfectible, then we just had to figure out HOW. And a lot of people thought they had the answer to that. Utopian communities were sprouting up everywhere in the 1800s.

A Utopia is a place and state of being in which everything is perfect.

Reflecting on the fervor among his own progressive circle of Boston intellectuals, Ralph Waldo Emerson once wrote to a friend overseas that, “We are all a little wild here with numerous projects of social reform. Not a reading man but has a draft of a new community in his waistcoat pocket.”

These Utopian communities usually had a charismatic leader, who had looked at American religion and politics, declared them hopelessly corrupt, and decided that a pure form of human society could be created through discipline to the leader’s optimistic and often grueling vision of moral purity.

The Shakers thought celibacy was the way. Their music and design aesthetic lives on, but a faith that denied the expression of a basic human need combined with an inability to birth new members could not survive.

The Oneida community in New York thought free love was the way. Their business still makes silverware, but the religion failed when the supposed “free love” turned out to be not free at all, but completely controlled and directed their male leader. The Oneida also had a fun practice of gathering in community for “mutual criticism” which does not sounds like a fun theme for a potluck.

And then there were the Utopians of New Harmony, Indiana. I had never heard about this dead utopia before, and I learned about it in the new, and absolutely riveting book by Rev. Nancy McDonald Ladd titled *After the Good News: Progressive Faith Beyond Optimism*.

It was *New Harmony* because the first Utopian community on that land, Harmony, had already failed. A wealthy white man named Robert Owen bought the town from the former failed utopia as a ready-made place where his perfect society would reign as an example to all mankind.

Here is how Rev. McDonald Ladd describes Owen’s New Harmony:

[The] new New Harmony experiment would reach for nothing less grand than the full and complete happiness of all the people, all the time, everywhere.

The founder not only believed that this all-encompassing good society was imminently possible, but also that it was replicable across the whole sweep of human culture.

He truly believed that the only thing the world was waiting for was one single artfully executed example.

As Emerson said, Owen “had not the least doubt that he had hit on a right and perfect socialism, or that all mankind would adopt it.”

So there we have our opposite definition of humility!

Owen went up and down the East Coast gathering the most elite, educated, intellectual, white (only white, of course) minds he could find to come to his perfect place.

And then—this is my favorite part—Owen convinced this whole group of intellectuals to travel down the Ohio River to Indiana in a trip “they had the audacity to call the “Boatload of Knowledge.”

Owen declared it held “more learning than ever was contained before on a boat.”

Nancy McDonald Ladd writes:

The Boatload of Knowledge was to be the seed of his new society. As such, it was replete with poets and geologists, cartographers, educational reformers, [and many holders of advanced degrees].

It was an impressive assortment to say the least, and yet there were some notable absences. Most importantly, there

was nary a single farmer, tradesperson, or laborer among their lot.

The debates on moral philosophy, Byronic poetry, and social welfare that raged on that boat must have been heady, but tangible conversations about how to grow food and cut firewood in this new Eden of theirs perhaps were not so well-informed.

I think you know where this is going. It was one of the fastest failures of a Utopia ever.

We can roll our eyes at the ridiculous optimism and hubristic plans of these foolish people of the past.

But how are we living in the hubris of our own utopian vision, choosing optimism instead of hope, choosing abstract ideals over actual human lives, choosing righteousness over relationship?

I keep imagining Robert Owen's Boatload of Knowledge, those smart people streaming off the boat, dreaming up big dreams for their perfect town, but never figuring out how to plant the seeds—literal seeds—that would have sustained them in the immediate first years.

Ultimately, Nancy McDonald Ladd calls out both our faith tradition and really all progressive Protestant religions for clinging too optimistically to the idea that mankind is perfectible

and progress can continue onwards and upwards forever, without acknowledging the deep brokenness and pain that exists and persists in our human relationships; the oppressions we perpetuate while pretending we are blameless; the many ways we are estranged from ourselves, from each other, and from God.

Every human has within us a will to power, and a will to mutuality.

Mutuality is interdependence, relationship, love of neighbor. The world we live in triggers our most base human instincts to seek power, keep power, and wield power.

The religion we practice only matters if it pushes us to seek relationships, keep relationships, and be transformed by relationships.

To be humbled and made honest by and for our relationships.

When we choose power over mutuality, we are choosing to be estranged from ourselves, from others, and from God.

Each day we are confronted with the choice: to choose power and estrangement, or to choose mutuality and relationships.

One mantra I use to help me make good choices is Less Control. More Love.

I've been working on two lessons of humility: first is planning for sabbatical, and the second has been this year's budgeting process for next year.

My sabbatical will be mid June through mid-December 2019. Planning for sabbatical has made me admit to myself my completely hubristic fear that if I stop working, everything will fall down. Anyone else have that fear? (I like that you're broken, broken like me!)

And yet my will to power and control meets my true faith in the mutuality of our relationship: that what makes Follen Church Follen Church is not me, but *us*.

I can take part in the commandment to rest, to pray, to take a minister's sabbath and have faith that the relationships we have built together will sustain all of us. It is humbling to keep reminding myself that you will be just fine without me. As long as you want me back!

Also humbling has been the realization that after dreaming big dreams about our castle in the clouds, our own New Harmony rising behind us—that we still need to plant the seeds that will sustain us next year. In this case the seeds are dollars.

Onwards and upwards forever isn't a plan. But investing in meaningful relationships, in people, in musical friendships and justice relationships and fulfilling promises, that's a plan.

In recent sermons I have said that God is Love; and I have said Love is God.

As Nancy McDonald Ladd says,

“Our relationship to God in the liberal church is not supposed to be simple. It demands something of us. It compels us to find new courage.

Anyone who has ever been in love can profess that it is not generally so cozy a thing.

Love—of oneself, of one another, or of God—is bold, heartbreaking, and more than a little scary.

If God’s name is love, then God compels us to resist the fall to sinful violence by pushing back with muscular resolve against the social structures that confine our capacity to care.

A universalist God for a tragic era is ... a fierce and compelling power that grips us by the collar ...and calls us to choose the will to mutuality all over again, even when that choice is so risky that it could utterly remake us.

[...]

Some measure of estrangement may be part of the human experience. We may not be able to banish it altogether any more than we could cultivate carefully studied moral perfection.

...[Still,] Just because we are honest does not mean we cannot be hopeful.

Hope, after all, is not just another version of optimism.

Optimism tells a preordained narrative.

It is an assertion that the scales have already been tipped toward triumph.

Optimism is always busy absolving somebody.

Hope is different.

Like faith, hope is the exact opposite of certainty.

It does not presume an outcome for good or for ill.

It lies in the waiting moment when the tug from both directions is not yet fully resolved and when a great many things are still possible.

It moves in the humble spaces that open when we allow ourselves to be uncertain and thus not fully self-contained.

It is the possibility, though not the inevitability, of a better way.

I like that you're broken

Broken like me

I like that you're lonely

Lonely like me

I could be lonely with you

In our human brokenness, in our human loneliness, we have the holy hope for a better way. We can choose mutuality and turn away from power. We can choose relationship and let go of control. We can “encounter another human being not as someone you can use, change, fix, help, save, enroll, convince,

or control, ....but simply as your other self in the world—for whom you may care as instinctively as you care for yourself ...This can be as frightening as it is liberating. It may be the only real spiritual discipline there is.”

May we seek humility in all we profess, in all we do, and may we be transformed by it.

*Amen.*