

“From You I Receive”

Sermon delivered by Rev. Joan Javier-Duval

Unitarian Church of Montpelier

October 2, 2016

Our theme for the month of October is humility. Over the course of the month, we will explore what it means to be a community of humility.

In our times now, humility seems awfully out of place. Mainstream media is dominated by those who can speak the loudest and most insistently. On the whole, the broader culture is oriented more towards promoting self-esteem and personal gain, and if humility has anything to do with being meek or self-effacing, we don't want anything to do with it.

Perhaps because of its forgotten quality, I think it is especially important these days to consider the role of humility in our lives.

As with many ideas, it might seem easiest to define or describe humility by what it is NOT. We know instinctively when someone is not displaying humility. We recognize pride and conceit and arrogance pretty easily. Most of us, I would guess, find those qualities distasteful.

On the opposite end, we have the qualities of meekness and modesty. Taken to the extreme, humility might be thought of as self-denial or submissiveness.

Humility, as I understand it, however, is not about passivity. It is not withdrawing oneself or denying your own agency. While there is an aspect of humility that is about keeping our egos in check, it is in the service of our relationships and connections to others.

The Catholic nun and theologian Joan Chittister writes that, “Humility is simply a basic awareness of my relationship to the world and my

connectedness to all its circumstances. It is the acceptance of relationships with others, not only for who they are but also for who I am.”¹

When we are humble, we recognize and live into the basic truth that we need one another.

The reading we shared earlier names this truth. We need one another when we mourn and would be comforted, when we are afraid, when we are in temptation and need to be recalled to our best selves. We need one another in the hour of success and in the hour of defeat. All our lives we are in need and others are in need of us.

How often do we really allow the truth of that reality to sink in?

While this truth is beautiful and reassuring, it can also be a little terrifying.

This need for one another isn't just about what someone else can do for us, it is also about recognizing who I am, what I bring to the relationship, and what my own needs are.

It can be scary to know that we need one another as much as we do. If we need one another, then there are times when each of us will need something from someone else, when we'll need a helping hand in one way or another.

Reaching out and asking for help makes us feel vulnerable. And, most of us, don't want to feel that way. It is often easier to say we are fine or diminish our own needs. This can be true especially if you are accustomed to being the person taking care of everyone else's needs.

Being humble means facing up to our own vulnerability at times.

¹ Joan Chittister, *Wisdom Distilled from the Daily: Living the Rule of St. Benedict Today*, Kindle version (63).

For me, the vulnerability of asking for help is intimately connected to the fear of failure. If I ask for help, have I failed at my job as a mother or wife or simply at being a self-sufficient adult? If I ask for help, am I admitting that there's something I don't know or don't know how to do that I **should** know or know how to do?

My own hesitancy around asking for help at times is that I don't necessarily want other people to see or know that I'm struggling.

I was traveling with a friend in China several years ago now, and we had decided to visit the island of Putuoshan off the eastern coast between Ningbo and Shanghai. The only way to travel there and back was by boat, and to return to Shanghai we had to take a 14 hour ferry. And, since we were graduate students with limited financial resources at the time, we opted for the cheapest tickets which were way down in the "belly" of the boat well below deck level. Being on boats has always made me a bit queasy, so I was not looking forward to this journey. Once we got going, I was even more terrified than I initially thought. I was feeling sick and just kept having terrible thoughts about getting trapped down there in our tiny cabin. So, I decided to hunker down. I put turned my iPod on, plugged my earphones in, and just tried to ignore my fears and discomfort. I may have looked over to where my friend was once or twice in the entire fourteen hour trip without saying a word to her.

Later, I realized that perhaps there was a lost opportunity there to connect with my friend. I'm sure we were both scared and struggling, but it was easier to just keep our heads down and barrel through.

My struggling in the moment made me feel weak and helpless and was not something I wanted to share with someone else.

This view of struggle and vulnerability is not how all people in all cultures approach things, however.

This was made apparent to an American graduate student who went to Japan to research teaching methods and found himself sitting in the back of a crowded fourth-grade math class.

The lesson that day was focused on how to draw three-dimensional cubes on paper. One child in the class was having a lot of trouble with the lesson. His cube was all crooked on the page. And the teacher asked this student to go to the board at the front of the class. The American researcher found this interesting and surprising since in American classrooms it is usually the best students who are invited to the board to demonstrate for the class. The researcher watched with interest as the Japanese student dutifully made his way to the board and started to draw, but still couldn't complete the cube. Every few minutes, the teacher would ask the rest of the class whether the student had gotten it right, and the class would look up from their work, and shake their heads no. This process repeated itself throughout the class period. As it went on, the researcher noticed that he was getting more and more anxious empathizing with the child and expecting him to break down into tears, defeated and humiliated, at any moment.

But, the child didn't break into tears. He simply continued to calmly draw his cube.

At the end of the class, he did make his cube actually look like a cube, and the teacher asked, "how does that look, class?" And, they looked up and said, "He did it!" and broke into applause.

The researchers say that this experience revealed to him the enormous difference between Eastern and Western cultures in how they approach

struggle. In Western cultures, broadly speaking, struggle is seen as weakness, whereas, in Eastern cultures, struggle is seen as emotional strength.

The classmates' applause weren't for the student's correct answer. Their applause were a sign of their being with him in the struggle.

Can we allow ourselves to be humble enough and vulnerable enough to let others witness our struggle?

That is what asking for help at its core is really about. Its about recognizing our own struggles and being willing to let others witness to it as well.

Our struggles do not need to be sources of embarrassment. We don't have to hide the ways we struggle from other people.

Humility isn't found in denying our needs. It comes in recognizing that we can't make it through life alone.

There is an old story that tells of a little boy who is having a difficult time trying to lift a heavy stone. His father comes along and seeing him trying—and failing—to lift the stone, asks him, "Are you using all your strength?" The little boy looks at him impatiently, and says, "of course I am!" "No, you are not," responds the father, "I am right here waiting and you haven't asked me to help you."

Humbly asking others for help is an act of recognizing that our strength lies not just within us but in the people all around us as well.

The help we need may simply be someone there beside us witnessing us in our struggle. Or, it may be something more tangible, like a warm bed to sleep in for the night, or some way to help make our ends meet. All of these ways

of giving and receiving help invite us into more vulnerable and intimate relationship.

Amanda Palmer, whose words I shared in our reading earlier, started her professional career as an artist as a street performer. She was a living statue. The 8 foot bride. She would stand on top of an egg create in Harvard Square dressed in a long white gown and long black wig, her face painted with white make-up. She would stand completely still until a passerby stopped to place some money in her jar. Then she would come to life, pick a flower from her bouquet and offer it to her benefactor. She made a pretty predictable income, \$40-60 an hour. Amanda recounts many moments of intimacy with her audience as 'The Bride.' Moments when someone would approach her, place a dollar bill in her jar, and then just look into her eyes. "Thank you. I see you," her eyes would say. "Nobody ever sees me. Thank you," their eyes would say back.

Amanda Palmer went on to pursue her dream of becoming a musician. She started a two person punk cabaret band called The Dresden Dolls and much of that work took place within the gift economy with her band using social media to find places to crash for the night with fans, or finding a place to practice on a piano for free. Once on tour in Melbourne, she used Twitter to ask, "Where in Melbourne can I buy a neti pot?" and a nurse who worked in nearby hospital drove over to the cafe she was in to bring her one. Amanda bought her a smoothie and they sat and talked about nursing and death. Later on in her career, she started a new band, and after getting dropped by their record label, they started a crowdfunding campaign through Kickstarter with the goal of raising \$100,000. They raised \$1.2 million.

Amanda cites those early days of street performance as 'The Bride' as being the seminal experience in learning to ask for help.

Palmer's experience reveals to us that asking for and receiving help is an act of intimacy. It naturally require closeness with another person. This may or may not be physical closeness, but it is a closeness that reveals real human need and that draws people into human relationship.

This relationship can be mutual and collaborative and over time the distinctions between and giver and receiver break down. We begin to recognize, as Palmer writes, that "we have the power to help each other."

In this community, we take turns being givers and being receivers. That mutual exchange and collaboration is happening all the time. I am witness to it through the stories you share of people bringing meals when you or a loved one has faced an illness, or in helping a friend tend their garden or walk their dogs, or looking after one another's children when you just need a break.

A lot of this care is provided unbidden. You simply see a need and offer help. It's often pretty easy to take on that role of giver and helper. It is harder to place yourself in the role of receiver, so I think that we can also practice intentionally asking others for help.

There are many ways that you can ask for help within this community. Our lay pastoral care team is here as a resource during those times of struggle and uncertainty to offer a gentle presence. Our Caring Network is available to help you when you're not able to attend to the normal tasks of daily life for whatever reason. And, our Care Fund is available to provide financial help in times you may be struggling to meet your basic expenses.

I encourage you to reach out through this community and also to the people and support networks in your own life.

Take the risk of letting others know when you need help.

Take the risk of being seen and witnessed to in the fullness of who you are, joys and struggles and all.

As Maya Angelou writes, "We need Joy as we need air. We need Love as we need water. We need each other as we need the earth we share."

Let us live like we need one another.