
Humble Pie

Deuteronomy 8:11-20

A sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on Sunday, June 17, 2018,
by the Rev. Dr. Luke A. Powery

Sometimes, we need to eat humble pie. We say silly things, have to eat our words and admit that we are wrong. To do so can be humbling and might even be humiliating. But nothing is wrong with humble pie. And 'humble pie' has interesting linguistic roots. In the 14th century, the numbles was the name given to the heart, liver, and entrails of animals, especially of deer. By the 15th century, this word 'numbles' had become 'umbles,' Umbles were used as an ingredient in pies, and the first record of 'umble pie' in print is as late as the 17th century. Umbles derives from Latin and Old French words meaning 'loins.' Humble means 'of lowly rank' or 'having a low estimate of oneself' and umble pies were known to be eaten often by those in a humble situation (i.e. the poor); thus, we get 'humble pie.' And sometimes we all need to eat it.

The children of Israel had to. Moses' words to them are not surprising because we're told in the book of Numbers that Moses himself, "was very humble, more so than anyone else on the face of the earth" (Num 12:3). So what he says through his slow-of-speech self is not a shock. "Do not exalt yourself, forgetting the Lord your God." God led you forty years in the wilderness to humble you (8:2, 3, 16), which he repeats a couple of times in his speech (chapter 8). There's something about humility on the journey with God.

At times, we may think too high of ourselves when our beginning and ending is pretty low actually, as low as the ground. "Humility" is derived from the Latin word *humus* or earth; the humble person has his or her feet on the ground, on the earth. They're levelheaded and are not the center of their own universe. How can it ever be any different when we are human, from the earth? We are nothing but dust. I call this "the ethics of dust" in which we remember that from dust we've come and to dust we shall return, which should hopefully guide our daily social and personal ethics. Sometimes, we act as if we created the dust. But we are creature, not Creator. We are from the ground and maybe it takes a wilderness experience to remind us of this. It doesn't have to be that way, but maybe this is God's way with you as it was with Israel.

We can get caught up in bragging about our children with bumper stickers—"My child is an honor student at success academy." What about a sticker that would say, "My child learned humility at school this month"? (Dallas Willard) In the ancient Jewish text, *Tosefta Sanbedrin*, we are taught that, "When you turn proud, remember that a flea preceded you in the order of Divine Creation." That's how small we are. "The sea is so wide but [our] boat is so small." And we don't know everything, can't know everything. God fed the children of Israel in the wilderness with manna, "that [their] ancestors did not know, to humble you..." There are things that we just don't know, can't know, won't ever know, because we are human, from the earth, *humus*.

So, humility can be a help by reminding us that we are from the ground. After his epic saga *Roots* was published in 1976, Alex Haley said that in his office he had a picture of a turtle sitting on a fencepost. When he looked at it, Haley remembered a lesson taught to him by his friend John Gaines: "If you see a turtle on top of a fencepost, you know he had some help." And so Haley said,

“Anytime I start thinking, ‘Wow, isn’t this marvelous what I’ve done!’ I look at that picture and remember how this turtle -- me -- got up on that post.” We all have received help to be where we are today and to do what we are doing.

Most importantly, the turtle reminds us of what Moses told Israel, “Do not say to yourself, ‘My power and the might of my own hand have gained me this wealth.’ But remember the Lord your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth...” In other words, “I will lift mine eyes to the hills from whence cometh my help? My help cometh from the Lord, maker of heaven and earth” (Psalm 121). Humility can be a help by reminding us not to forget God and help us not to suffer from spiritual dementia. “Do not exalt yourself, forgetting the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery...” Humility can help us remember that any progress we’ve made is not due to our own power and might. In the wilderness, the children of Israel “learn their incapacity to survive on their own and the power and disposition of God to provide whatever they need” (Patrick Miller). God uses sustaining means that no one else was acquainted with in order to make them understand “that one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.” It is God who provides gifts, even the gift of life, in a wilderness. Humility leads us to remember God’s role in any good we have done or accomplished, any victories won, mountains climbed, grants received, books published, successes reached. It is God who gives us power. How could it be any other way when we are merely dust from the ground?

It’s interesting that Deuteronomy 8, if preached at all, is often preached on Thanksgiving and is listed in lectionary resources as a Thanksgiving text. This reveals that our response to God’s life-giving, empowering, delivering action in our lives should be thanksgiving! Every day is a day of thanksgiving. Giving thanks that God would care enough and love enough to provide for us even when we act like angels of arrogance. Humility can help us not to forget this God and all that God has done.

Remember, we are turtles on a fencepost. And we landed there because of God. We had help. Dust is not self-created and none of us are either. As Maya Angelou once said, “Modesty is a learned affectation. It’s no good. Humility is great, because humility says, “There was someone before me. I’m following in somebody’s footsteps.” Humility can help us remember that we aren’t self-created.

You may only see me in this pulpit but I’m not up here alone. It’s a tight space every time I preach here because I bring all of those who’ve shaped me and influenced me, those who have predated me, those who have taught me, mentored me, loved me, prayed for me. The great cloud of witnesses that have made me who I am and apart from whom I would be nothing because I’m a turtle perched up in this pulpit. When I stand here, I have great grandfather Alexander Powery with me, Grandpa Alphaeus and Grandma Alice Powery with me, Grandfather Stephen and Grandmother Evelyn Ebanks with me. I have my parents Byron and Emittie Powery with me, my siblings Calron, Dwight, Emerson, Monique with me and their whole families—in-laws, nieces and nephews. I have Aunt Ura, Aunt Leitha, Aunt Dor, with me. I have Sis. Tucker and Bro. Brown and Bro. Davis and Bro. Mack with me. I have Jackie Brown with me and Kathy Keith with me. I have Adrian Backus with me. I have Floyd Thompkins with me. I have Drs. Jacks and Loder and Paris and Blount and Hanson and Stackhouse and McKee and Taylor and Wilson and Jacobsen and Van Seters and Duncan and Gilbert and Turner, all with me. I have Franklin Hickman and James Cleland and Robert Young and Will Willimon and Sam Wells, all with me, because humility reminds us that we

stand on the shoulders of those before us. They are the ones who help us go higher as we even remember our lowly, humble state. Without others, we would not be who we are to be, at all, for our lives happen and flourish through the presence of others and God.

Oh, little turtles, we can't afford the price of arrogance. We will fall off the fencepost if we go that way and I know we don't want to spend forty years in a wilderness to be formed in humility. Being from the earth, *humus*, from the dust, means that *we have been shaped* into what we are today. We have been formed by a Potter who has molded the clay of our lives by using other people and life experiences, to make us who we are. Humility knows that we have been helped through means, not of our own doing or knowledge, but God's.

So it is good to eat humble pie to remember who we are and whose we are. It is good to eat humble pie, even if umbles are not its content, but rather, pieces of charred, bloodstained, splintered wood.

It won't be that tasty but it will remind us of our manna from heaven on this Christian journey. God's bread of life baked on a wooden cross. This humble pie is sour and bitter because of the cup of blood poured out on it as a love offering. Broken pieces of wood and a drizzle of blood forms this pie into the shape of a cross, the cross of Christ.

This is a humble pie, the body and blood of Christ given for us, that we did not even know. Yet it is a pie that must be eaten for by consuming it, we digest the humble Christ "who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross."

His humility can humble and heal us because Christ's humility humbles death and defeats it, once and for all. There's no boasting at this table. We can only give thanks.

And I won't lie. There's nothing wrong with eating this humble pie; it will ensure that you will not die. Bon appetit.