

Bold Humility

Epiphany Sunday

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I've been intrigued and amused by the opening lines of the Time Person of the Year article published a few weeks ago now about Pope Francis. The article started with this story:

Once there was a boy so meek and modest, he was awarded a Most Humble badge.

The next day, it was taken away because he wore it. Here endeth the lesson.

I thought the Time article about Francis was superb for many reasons, but that wonderful opening parable frames one of its themes: the fascinating question of it is possible for a Pope to be humble; possible for the leader of millions, keeper of Catholic doctrine, head of the Roman Church to have humility as part of his identity. Pope Francis, it would seem, is trying, but it is a conundrum.

And I offer that same conundrum to us – although perhaps it's not as clear why there would be that conundrum for us: none of us are candidates this or any year either for Pope or for Time Person of the Year. But consider what we celebrate on an Epiphany Sunday, at the culmination of the Christmas season: the scripture and stories of this day make clear that for all the Christmas talk of humble birth and lowly estate, ours is a faith that proclaims this Jesus as Sovereign of all, worshipped by kings and the true light of God for all the nations. These are not humble claims in which we stand as Christians entering the season of Epiphany.

I'm not so sure that most of us even think much about how such broad Christian assertions do sound – they can be so familiar to us that we don't take too much notice, or perhaps you

just haven't felt compelled to think through what that might sound like to others. But it seems to me that the figure of Pope Francis has struck a chord in many both inside the church and out in asking if humility has a place in Christianity – raised the question I think because humility has not been the primary presentation or perception of our faith, or of religion in general for that matter – we are not the only faith to make broad claims for ourselves. So is humility necessary, or possible, or good?

I would like to assert that it is: that humility for a Christian is necessary and possible and good – and even more, ultimately, that humility is an essential part of a rousing Epiphany celebration– bold humility is what I seek in this Epiphany journey. And in the few moments I have this Epiphany Sunday, let me try to tell you why as succinctly and sagely as I can.

I think it's best to be clear that I don't take much convincing about the need for humility- I bring a bias toward a humility in considering this conundrum. In some ways that could put me in the situation of the boy with the 'Most Humble' Badge – so it's not that I'm trying to brag about my love of humility or claim I'm so good at it. I'm simply saying part of my faith story is having a sense that in the midst of the triumphal tones of the Christian faith, something doesn't sound quite right and so humility seems a way to bring some harmony. But in doing so, I think I've fallen down a couple of humble rabbit holes. The first is a kind of humility that is actually a lot more like shame – and that has come with my learning, awareness of the many terrible things that have been done in the name of Christianity over time. It's awful – and I think: we need to be humble about our history! – which is good, important, but it seems if you stay there, you're just ashamed, or timid... and feel no right to say or claim or do much at all. And the other humble rabbit hole is a humility about faith that ends up actually being a lot more like uncertainty. It's a language of mystery and questions about faith that is very important and good, but can end up again in this odd place where it seems there is no standing for or voice for much at all. And you know what's really odd

about these humility rabbit holes? - they can actually end up being very superior and judgmental places: I've at times found myself quite dismissive of someone not as ashamed of Christian history as I am; or quite willing to look down on someone with beliefs more set in place than my own – not exactly a humble attitude.

I don't think there is much of a home for us in such humility rabbit holes. Instead, I think I've found this inviting abode called bold humility that is a much more hospitable place, and I'd like to see how Isaiah 60 and Ephesians 3 and Matthew 2 call us there on this Epiphany celebration:

Isaiah 60 – 'Arise, shine...the glory of the Lord...all nations drawn to worship...all wealth and praise offered to the LORD' Where is the humility there for us? Well, humility for us because it has nothing to do with us – it is about God. Where we find ourselves in Isaiah is with everyone else – 'darkness covering the earth and all people' – that's us. The glory and the light is about God – and what bold news that gives us: to all of us in darkness, here is our God - a God who gives light, and God who brings together peoples, a God in whose presence there is joy.

Ephesians 3 – 'the riches and promises of Christ, the wisdom of God', as Paul writes as one to whom mysteries of the generations have been revealed in Christ and through whom that mystery of God's grace is made known to the world. Where is the humility in that? Because it has nothing to do with Paul, or those who follow Christ in Paul's path – it is about the revelation of a God whose grace is for all. That's the stunning news here: God is for Gentiles too – that's everybody. And that is the bold news we are given: barriers are broken down...between God and humanity, between human distinctions and divisions. Paul says 'we have access to God in boldness and confidence' – not because of who we are but because of who we see God to be in Christ.

Matthew 2 – a Roman King afraid of a baby; intellectual elites offering worship and wealth to the Christ - where is the humility in that? Well, how about a little different tack on this one – which is to notice that these are astrologers who come to worship Christ – their astrology guides them, and God speaks to them, and they are heroes in this story. So I’m just saying, if you’re looking for a proof text on pure doctrine and condemnation of religious plurality, you will not find it here! And with that humility, what a bold picture we’re given of people seeking God not in the crushing power of human kingdoms – but finding and offering themselves to a God who brings joy and hope.

Humility, my friends, is not about shame or uncertainty;

boldness is not about superiority or aggression.

Humility is pointing to who God is, shown to us in the light, life and grace of Christ;

boldness is the passion that such good gifts are needed in a world of darkness.

Bold humility is the home for our Epiphany celebration – the awesome mystery of God’s love shown to the world in Jesus Christ, and the boldness to believe that our lives are called to shine that light of God into the world.

Once there was a church so meek and modest, it was awarded a Most Humble badge. The next day, they celebrated Epiphany. Here endeth the lesson.

AMEN.