

“Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven.

So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.”

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As part of this year’s Summer Sermon series, I’ve been doing a little background work. This past week I’ve spent some time in conversation with two different addiction counselors; one a private clinical counselor, the other who now heads a pretty good sized recovery center in the county.

With both of them, we talked about 12-Step Programs, their strengths and weaknesses, and what about them that makes them work.

They both agreed, independently, that they don’t know what it is that ‘clicks’ with people, how it is that recovery truly begins. They acknowledged the reality of relapse; but also again, independently, used the same three words that are part of Step 7, and that all nearly universally come into play when recovery takes place and holds fast. These three words are the focus of our message for today... **HUMBLY. ASK. GOD.**

These three words are the bread & butter of how we understand our lives, the meaning we find in them, and how we can take the necessary steps to live as God in Christ would have us live. **HUMBLY. ASK. GOD.**

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Yogi Berra, the famous New York Yankees’ catcher & later manager of the Yankees and Mets, is quoted as once responding to a reporter’s question about why he tended to play better in the dog days of summer than at other cooler times, in his typically quirky manner: “It’s not the heat, it’s the humility.” (Whether or not it was the *humidity* that Yogi was referring to, the

reporter didn't ask... he got his quotable quote for his piece.)

Humility is another word for a posture of receptivity (not a phrase Yogi would have used- but as a catcher, he would have gotten it's meaning.)

Humility is about being in a position of asking, not demanding, aware of the limited resources one has to draw on, regardless of one's station in life. The French Renaissance writer Montaigne put it this way: **"Even on the highest throne in the world, we still sit only on our own bottom."**

Those who enter a clinic or treatment center know full well where they sit; in a position of desperate need, with no where else to turn. In the final analysis, we all occupy a similar space.

When we come to church, I wonder how much humility we bring with us? There always seems to me to be more than a hint of irony when it comes to humility, especially in the realm of religion. The medieval monk turned reformer, Martin Luther, one not unfamiliar with the tests and trials of faith, said that **"True humility does not know that it is humble. If it did, it would burst with pride at the contemplation of so fine a virtue."** Remember the old country song about how hard it is to be humble, when you're perfect in every way?

So, maybe we need to look at humility from another angle. Richard Rohr suggests that the opposite of humility is entitlement or privilege, and he's not the only one saying so these days... **"Any notion of entitlement, that we deserve, or are owed, or have an inherent right to anything from anyone else absolutely undermines any notion of faith, hope or love between two involved parties; that is - with other people, or our relationship with God."**(p.61)

In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus' sternest warnings go to those who are rich. The camel passing through the eye of a needle was meant as a message for those who are lured by wealth into the false security of believing that one's bank account ensures health, wellness or a meaningful life. Addictions know of no such thing.

False securities are easy prey; among the most vulnerable of places to fall into the lure of an addiction, and among the least likely places from which to ask for help. HUMBLY. ASK. GOD.

When you ask for anything, you are acknowledging both a need and your place in the pecking order of life. Asking for someone to pass the salt at the dinner table has some core elements in common with asking for someone to listen to your life's struggles. To ask is to put yourself in the position as recipient, not as giver, or donor, or benefactor. Asking - is another word for relationship, a synergy which creates an exchange larger than itself. Asking, in prayer, is not

always a means of stating what it is we want, but is just as much a way to keep a relationship alive and moving. The power of prayer is built upon the power of the relationship we build with God more than the answers we may or may not receive.

Jesus specifically instructed his followers to ask in prayer in secret, not just so that people could no longer boast about their time in prayer, but also that prayer would become a closer time of bonding between ourselves and God; a time of focused attention, devotion and self-awareness.

Asking in prayer is a process of gaining confidence in the presence of God and a realization of our own limitations as human beings. HUMBLY. ASK. GOD.

One of the more insightful comments of this exercise in “Breathing Underwater” with Richard Rohr, in Step 7, is that we are told specifically not to go after the faults we have ourselves, or we’ll go after the wrong things. Or we’ll find an easier substitute than the real thing. We can never engineer or guide our own transformation or conversion.

Instead, we are to ask God to reveal our real fault to us, which most commonly occurs by our own repeated failures and our learning as we go.

If we go after our own faults with our natural human tendencies, we can easily fall into the trap of replacing one addiction with another: usually with an unhealthy dose of anger, or hypocritical, self-righteous judgment, justifying ourselves that we are now better than before. He calls it our using the ‘anger stick’ that we pick up and wield at those who no longer meet our new-found standards. Those who live in glass houses shouldn’t throw stones, and all our lives are more transparent than we think they are.

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There is a brief ‘throwaway line’ that reveals more truth in the bigger picture of this journey than in the individual steps alone... Rohr comments that “after a few years in recovery, you will know that your deep desires came from God alone...”- a few years? (not a few days, or weeks, or months?!)

This had me think about the changes that take place in people’s lives over time; the ups and downs we live through- and the unseen guiding presence that steadies us on our way. In particular, I’ve thought about that fictitious person I came up with at the beginning of this series; Matthew Levy, the Tax Collector turned disciple. Once he was an outcast, a traitor to his people, a tool of Rome. Upon Jesus’ call, not by anything he did himself, he was redeemed, restored and placed in a revered spot, likely because of his education- his ability to write, but even more so for

the potential of devotion and faith that Jesus somehow saw in him. I have to think that the three key words for today, HUMBLY. ASK. GOD. Must have been important in Matthew Levy's journey of faith.

I've also thought this week about someone else, perhaps a modern-day Matthew Levy, someone who was once reviled in the public eye who then made good.

There are a number of relatively famous folks out there-once infamous, and the person I have in mind is the reason for the sermon title.

The title is something of a pun; a play on words, similar to the 'patience of Job'...is 'The Humility of Jeb' (well, not quite, I know, but it was worth a try.) The Jeb I'm referring to is not the first one who comes to your mind, in this ever so early Presidential primary season. I'm not going there with Jeb Bush.

Another Jeb that comes to mind, familiar to people of a certain age, is Jeb Magruder, of Watergate fame, or infamy. As part of the team of Richard Nixon's Committee to Re-Elect the President, he plead guilty to conspiracy and served time in a federal prison as a result of his involvement. There were others of his ilk, like Charles Colson, once successful businessmen become third-rate crooks, involved in burglarizing the offices of the Democratic National Committee, in 1972. The reason I think of this Jeb is that I met him, a good while back, in 1982, when he was a student at Princeton Seminary. After his prison time, he turned his life over and humbly started anew as a Seminary student. We crossed paths his last last year, and my first.

I was fresh out of college and he was one of the 'big shots' on campus, (for all the wrong reasons.) I guess as much as anything, what people wanted to know from him was why he simply didn't say no to cheating on a national scale, or to question what it was he was being asked to do. Relevant to this sermon is the one response I can remember from him; probably the same line he used over and over again when people asked him 'why?' He said that he was addicted to power, and didn't know it's strength. It happened faster than he knew it, and held on to him stronger than he could ever have imagined.

Now, I've never been in the halls of power in the White House, but it doesn't take too much imagination to understand what he was saying.

The power of government has been a mainstay for Television drama for a long time, take, for example, The West Wing or House of Cards.

What Jeb Magruder said might not have been as exceptional as how he said it, though. He had

been there, and he had been punished for it. He was discredited; his name was mud. He walked around with a sort of 'hang-dog' look. The best word to describe him was... humble. Quiet, resolved, clearly still repentant and sorry, and humble. Perhaps what he carried with him in his years of ministry later on as a Presbyterian Pastor in Churches in California, Ohio and Kentucky, that made him real- that people could clearly see in him, was that, like Matthew Levy- he was someone who had done wrong and was redeemed. He carried with him his guilt, but also, humbly, the forgiveness he had received by Jesus's grace. All the weakness in him had been transformed, not by anything that he himself did, but clearly by God's gift of forgiveness and nothing else. People could see their own forgiveness in him.

He humbly asked God, and received. May we do the same, in Jesus' name. Amen.