Sunday, October 31, 1999
HUMILITY DEFICIT DISORDER
Matthew 23:1-12

Of all the many and varied deficit disorders that afflict human beings — such as attention deficit disorder, vision deficit disorder, commitment deficit disorder, gratitude deficit disorder, integrity deficit disorder, and faith deficit disorder — there is one that especially plagues many of us: humility deficit disorder. This disorder is frequently found in people who consider themselves to be the most religious.

Jesus had a lot to say about the lack of humility in overly religious people. The opposite of humility is excessive pride and self-righteousness. People with humility deficit disorder have difficulty admitting when they have made a mistake. They are convinced they know more than others on almost any subject, but especially about God and God's ways. They even believe God loves them more than others because they follow God's rules exactly.

Furthermore, as Jesus said in the passage from Matthew's Gospel, "They do all their deeds to be seen by others... They love to have the place of honor at banquets and the best seats in the synagogues." And then Jesus added this warning: "All those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."

What are some of the causes of humility deficit disorder? A major cause, according to the teachings of Jesus, is extreme religious dogmatism. The more dogmatic you are in your religious belief and practice, the more you are plagued with humility deficit disorder.

Here's how it originates: all religions attempt to answer one fundamental question—"How can I absolutely be sure that God loves and accepts me?" One of the deepest desires of human beings is to know that we are connected to the source of all being — what we call God. It's another way of wanting to know that life makes sense, that there is a purpose to life beyond simply surviving — eating, sleeping, working, growing older, and dying.

One way in which various religions have attempted to satisfy this yearning for a relationship with God and to answer this question is by outlining and promulgating certain rules and rituals for individuals to follow, along with the promise that if these rules are obeyed, that will satisfy God and thereby earn God's acceptance.

This is the context for the Gospel reading today from Matthew. Jesus is speaking to the crowds and his disciples, telling them that the religious authorities of that time placed heavy burdens on people's shoulders in terms of religious rules and rituals.

At the same time, Jesus acknowledges that the religious tradition they represent is important. But like all religious traditions, the dogma can become so complicated, burdensome, and rigid that soon the God behind the dogma is forgotten and lost. It becomes all law and no grace. God's love gets lost in the process.

In addition, there are always those who, in their attempt to earn God's love by following all the rules exactly, come to believe they are better than others who do not follow every detail of every ritual. Humility deficit disorder is the result.

Remember, Jesus was not saying that religious rules and rituals are bad. On the contrary, he affirmed religious rules and moral laws such as the Ten Commandments as gifts from God. They are necessary in life. However, he was saying that even if you teach and follow them exactly, that's not what causes God to love and accept you. They are not to be seen as a burden but as a gift.

According to Jesus, there are at least two bad side effects of humility deficit disorder.

The first is that it leads to exclusiveness. Exclusiveness is the belief that since God loves our kind of people more than others, we have a right to separate ourselves from those other kinds of people and not be concerned about them because they are not worthy of God's love.

The Bible challenges this kind of religious exclusiveness all the way through. For example, the book of Jonah in the Old Testament was remembered and included in the Bible as a warning against this kind of exclusiveness. It is a rebuke to the expectation that God would annihilate unbelievers. It says, in effect, that those of us who know of God's love have a duty to share it with those who do not. God does not belong to us exclusively, nor has God chosen us exclusively, and God does not love us exclusively.

The purpose of the story of Jonah is to break through the dogmatism of that time and every time. The story proclaims what Jesus proclaimed — that God is the God of all people, and that God loves all people, no matter their ethnic origin or their sin.

In the story of Jonah, the city of Nineveh is where God sends Jonah, and it is where Jonah does not want to go because he has an excessive amount of humility deficit disorder. Nineveh is the symbol of the worst sin and evil in the world. It represents idolatry, brutality, and blasphemy. It's the kind of place a good and righteous religious person would avoid at all costs.

The story of Jonah expresses radical hope for the "Ninevehs" of this world. God is passionately concerned with Nineveh, the city whose wickedness stinks to high heaven. That's why, in the story, God sends Jonah to preach to the people of that city. God not only wants to save the people of that city but also wants to heal Jonah of his humility deficit disorder, and God accomplishes both objectives.

Humility deficit disorder leads to blindness, self-righteousness, and exclusiveness in our view of others. That's one of its disastrous and destructive side effects.

Another negative side effect of humility deficit disorder, according to Jesus, is that it leads to the wrong way of seeing and understanding ourselves. It can cause us to measure or evaluate ourselves by looking downward rather than upward.

To illustrate this point, Jesus told a story about two religious men, both of whom went into the temple to pray. One was a respected community leader, and the other was a person not respected. The religious leader was very dedicated to his service to God.

After all, you can tell if a person's heart is in something when it touches their stomach or their pocketbook. This man gave a tenth of his income to the church. For him, God was at least as real as the money in his wallet and bank account.

He was the kind of person churches depend on. He helps pay the bills and is faithful in every way. I'd love a church full of people with his devotion — people who care enough to be faithful in their commitments, people who tithe on their income and are grateful they can.

The other man, who was not respected, was a hated tax collector. He exerted a corrupting influence in the community. Yet, in the story, following their prayers in the temple, Jesus praised the despised man and condemned the other.

Why? Sometimes our standard answer is that everything looks different in God's eyes than in ours. But this is too easy an answer and only raises more questions. Is our judgment of no value at all? Does God always turn our values upside down?

Why then, in the story, is the tax collector's prayer accepted by God and that of the religious leader rejected?

It has to do with how each of these two individuals sees themselves and how they arrive at their self-understanding. Because one of them has humility deficit disorder, he uses the wrong standard for evaluating himself.

If you want to know yourself and love your neighbor as you love yourself, you need to have the right standard for judging who and what you are. The religious leader in the story measured himself by looking downward when determining his rating before God. He chooses the corrupt tax collector as his standard. Then, of course, the differences between them are obvious. Sure, he knows he has his faults. He doesn't claim to be perfect. He knows the temptations that trouble him, but he has controlled them. By comparing himself with this individual, he looks pretty good.

He doesn't give thanks to God that God has spared him from being a thief, adulterer, rogue, or tax collector; he gives thanks that he is not like them. "God, I thank you that I am not like other people…!" Really? Here he crosses from the grammar of gratitude into the grammar of excessive pride. He is afflicted with humility deficit disorder in a big way.

Now, he has stopped praying and started peeking. He coolly measures himself against another person and is quietly pleased with the difference. From the tax collector's point of view, the same would have been true. Had he measured himself against the religious leader and despaired at the difference, his prayer would have been just as false. It's the comparative sideward glance that is a symptom of humility deficit disorder. Whenever we measure ourselves downward, we can always find someone who is worse than us.

When you use this kind of measurement, you can become very content with yourself. You aren't challenged to make any improvements because you already consider yourself so much better, according to the standard you are using for measurement.

When I was growing up, there was a dairy company that advertised its product with the slogan, "milk from contented cows." The ad implies that there is also milk that comes from cows that are not content. I do not know much about cows, but I do know a little about people. When we begin to measure ourselves only by looking downward, it's easy to become too content with ourselves as we are. I worry about religious faith that only leads to contentment.

There is a wonderful story about a mountaineer who established quite a reputation for himself as a marksman with a rifle. Whoever followed him found target rings on trees and fences, with

a bullet hole always in the center. Asked to explain the secret of his skill, he said, “It’s easy. I just shoot and then draw a circle around the hole.”

The tax collector in the temple did not measure himself downward. He did not have humility deficit disorder. He didn’t even notice the other man. He wasn’t comparing himself with others to determine his standing before God. He was aware only of himself and God. The religious leader’s measurement by looking downward always produces false pride and gives one an inaccurate picture of oneself.

That’s why people enjoy gossip so much. It’s why we take delight in discussing the private weaknesses and failures of celebrities. At such moments, we feel so much better about ourselves because we are thinking with a certain air of moral superiority, “Such things don’t occur in my life.” Or, “Such things may occur in my life, but they certainly should not happen to a public figure.”

The grace of God can be corrupted by humility deficit disorder. However, when a person truly turns to God seeking forgiveness, they don’t think of other people at all. That’s why, in the story of the religious leader and the tax collector, Jesus holds up the tax collector’s prayer as a positive example. He measures himself upward! God is the standard. He knows that God does not compare him with others, and thus he comes to a true understanding of himself and his conduct. He does not have humility deficit disorder.

Lest we misunderstand, Jesus did not teach that there are no differences between people. Some are good, and some are bad. Some are better, and some are worse in their conduct. We have to make careful distinctions all the time. The question is, how do you measure yourself: by looking downward or looking upward?

How, then, do you overcome humility deficit disorder? The first step is to evaluate and measure yourself by looking to God instead of comparing yourself to others. You can always find someone who is worse than you or better than you. Remember, God never evaluates us by comparing us to others. All God wants to know is what each one of us has done with what God has given us.

The second step is to remember that the moral principles given to us by God are a gift. Following them to the best of your ability is not for the purpose of making yourself better than others or showing off how good you are. That’s why, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus advised us to do our good deeds in secret.

Finally, it helps in overcoming humility deficit disorder to remember that most of what we have has not come to us because we deserve it. It is a gift from God. Amen.