

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
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THE MOST HUMBLE MAN IN THE WORLD

Numbers 12: 1-15

I didn't realize how the title of my message would look in the church bulletin today until the bulletin had already been printed. If you follow the order of worship in the bulletin, I'm sure you noticed it. The line for THE MESSAGE gives the title: "The Most Humble Man in the World", which is followed immediately by "Pastor Neil Smith." Awkward. It looks like I'm shamelessly touting myself as "the most humble man in the world", doesn't it? Sorry about that. You and I both know that I am *not* the most humble person in the world. Declaring myself the most humble person in the world would remove all doubt (if there were any) and prove conclusively that I am *not*, wouldn't it?

Do you know the TV commercials for a certain brand of beer featuring "the most interesting man in the world"? I'm not sure what makes him so interesting, but that's what they say. How do you decide who the most interesting person in the world is? And is it possible to know who is the most humble person in the world? As a matter of fact, it is.

As I said last Sunday, the most humble person who ever lived is Jesus. Without a doubt. No contest. He is the supreme example of humility. When He says of Himself in Matthew 11, "I am gentle and humble in heart" (11:29), it is not an empty boast. It is the truth, a truth demonstrated in His incarnation, in His coming to us in flesh and blood, in the whole course of His life on earth as our Immanuel ("God with us"), and then in His suffering and death on the cross for us. Isaiah prophetically describes the Savior's humiliation in the famous words of Isaiah 53:

He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to Him,
nothing in His appearance that we should desire Him.
He was despised and rejected by men,
a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering.
Like one from whom men hide their faces
He was despised, and we esteemed Him not.
Surely He took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows,
yet we considered Him stricken by God,
smitten by Him, and afflicted.
But He was pierced for our transgressions,
He was crushed for our iniquities;
the punishment that brought us peace was upon Him,
and by His wounds we are healed.
(Isaiah 53:2b-5)

Ponder this for a moment: The eternal Son of God, setting aside all the glories of heaven, coming not to be served but to serve and to give His life as a ransom for many (Mark 10:45). And how was He treated? He was "despised," "rejected," "pierced," "crushed." Jesus

willingly went from the heights of exaltation, honor and praise to the depths of degradation and humiliation in His suffering and death on the cross. As Paul writes in his letter to the Galatians, Jesus redeemed us, He ransomed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for the Scripture says: “Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree” (Deuteronomy 21:23; Galatians 3:13). The Son of God was cursed for your sake and mine. Such humility. Such “amazing pity, grace unknown, and love beyond degree” (Isaac Watts).

We can say with absolute certainty that Jesus is the most humble person who ever lived. In the Old Testament, though, we are told that, in his day, 1,400 years before the birth of Jesus, Moses was the most humble person in the world. You will see it in today’s Scripture reading from the Old Testament Book of Numbers. Let’s give our full and reverent attention now to the reading of God’s Word from Numbers 12:1-15.

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Notice what is going on in this passage. Miriam and Aaron are Moses’ older sister and brother, respectively. What we have here is a case of sibling rivalry. Miriam and Aaron – Miriam especially, it seems – are jealous of Moses’ position of primacy as God’s designated leader of the people of Israel. They think they should receive as much respect, honor, and prestige as their baby brother. Miriam especially has allowed the bitter seeds of envy to take root in her heart, and she persuades Aaron to join her in a campaign of talking against Moses. Curiously, they don’t attack Moses’ leadership of Israel. Instead, they choose to criticize his wife. Do I need to tell you how wrong that is?

In verse 1 it says that Miriam and Aaron begin their campaign of criticism against Moses “because of his Cushite wife, for he had married a Cushite woman.” What is this all about? And who is the “Cushite woman” about whom they complain? Honestly, we don’t know for sure. It could be Moses’ wife Zipporah, who was a Midianite. In the Bible, though, “Cush” usually refers to Ethiopia. It is possible that Zipporah was of mixed Midianite-Cushite ancestry, and Miriam and Aaron use “Cushite” as a derogatory term because of Zipporah’s dark complexion.

Though the Scripture doesn’t tell us, it may also be that Zipporah has died, and Moses has married a woman of Cushite (Ethiopian) ancestry, and Miriam and Aaron are not happy about it. We don’t know for sure, because the Bible doesn’t tell us everything our inquiring minds would like to know.

What the Bible does tell us in this case is that their unhappiness about Moses’ wife is not the real issue. It is really just a smokescreen, a pretext for their attack on Moses’ position of leadership and authority. What they are really upset about is that they do not have equal status with Moses. They don’t want to be superior to Moses (presumably). But they want the same status, the same honor, the same recognition, the same authority, the same power and prestige as their brother. They are upset because Moses’ rank is higher than theirs.

It is in this context that we read this parenthetical statement in verse 3: “Now Moses was a very humble man, more humble than anyone else on the face of the earth.” I believe that

Moses is the primary author of the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible – Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. This has been the dominant view of biblical scholars for the last 3,000 years or more, and it is what I believe. That said, I do not think the words of verse 3 come from Moses. It would be strange and unseemly for the most humble person in the world to say so of himself. I believe the words of verse 3 were added by an unnamed writer under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit because it is something God wanted us to know.

One indicator of Moses' humility is that he doesn't try to defend himself when he comes under attack from Miriam and Aaron. He doesn't lash out at them in anger. He doesn't assert his authority to put them in their place. Content to leave the matter in God's hands, Moses says nothing. Sometimes, when you come under attack, when someone criticizes you unfairly, the best thing to do is to do nothing. Not always, perhaps. But sometimes. Sometimes it is best simply to leave the matter to God to sort out as He will. Moses concludes that this is one of those occasions. His refusal to retaliate against Miriam and Aaron is not a sign of weakness on his part. It is actually a sign of his inner strength, a strength of character forged during the 40 years he spent as a shepherd in Midian.

Moses leaves the matter in God's hands. And God has something to say about it. The Lord acts swiftly and decisively. Summoning Moses, Aaron, and Miriam to the tabernacle, the Lord defends and reaffirms the leadership of Moses, His servant, and chastises Miriam and Aaron severely for their presumptuous pride and rebellion born of envy. Their grumbling is not only an act of disloyalty to Moses, it is an act of disloyalty to God. The result, we read in verse 9, is that "the anger of the LORD burned against them" – against Miriam and Aaron – "and (the LORD) left them."

Dear friends, God is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in love. He is a compassionate and forgiving God. But sin still has consequences. For Miriam, because of her unloving attitude and gossip about Moses' wife, because of the self-promoting pride and envy she harbored in her heart toward Moses, the consequence is being stricken with some form of leprosy. From head to toe, she is covered with patchy, scaly, flaky skin. It is probably not leprosy as we usually think of it, but one of a number of infectious skin diseases. It may have been something like a severe case of psoriasis or eczema. Whatever its exact form, it causes great discomfort, and requires the person afflicted to be quarantined outside the camp, separated from the community of Israel.

Horried when he sees what has happened to Miriam, Aaron confesses their sinful folly to Moses and pleads for mercy. Moses, who might have taken some satisfaction or even pleasure in Miriam's punishment, immediately cries out to the Lord to heal her. Though Miriam and Aaron have unfairly criticized him and attacked his position of leadership, Moses does not hold a grudge against them. He refuses to let any root of bitterness grow up in his heart to cause trouble.

By God's decree, Miriam must remain outside the camp for seven days, her days of confinement and penitence to serve as an object lesson for the nation of Israel, showing how seriously God takes the sins of presumptuous pride, envy, and disloyalty to Him. The events

of Numbers 12 confirm the truth of Scripture we took note of last week, which is that “God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble” (Proverbs 3:34; James 4:6; 1 Peter 5:5).

You may wonder: Why is only Miriam punished with this leprous condition, and not Aaron also? The best answer I can give is that Miriam must have been the instigator of the attack on Moses’ leadership role. It must have been her idea.

As for Moses, he came to personify humility. During his own lifetime, and possibly until Jesus arrived on the scene, the Scripture attests that Moses was the most humble person in the world. But it wasn’t always that way. He wasn’t always so humble.

When Moses was born, you recall, the people of Israel were slaves in Egypt. Because Pharaoh had ordered the killing of all Hebrew male infants, Moses’ parents hid him for three months after his birth, and then, not knowing how it would turn out, placed him in a basket in the Nile River, where he was rescued by the daughter of Pharaoh, who then raised Moses as her own son. Growing up in the household of Pharaoh with all its perks and privileges, receiving a royal education, being groomed for greatness, it would not come as a surprise that Moses thought of himself more highly than he should. As a younger man, Moses thought it would be intuitively obvious to the Israelites that he had the leadership skills and connections to liberate them from their slavery in Egypt. He thought they would embrace his leadership, but when it became known that he had killed an Egyptian for mistreating a Hebrew slave, Moses ran for his life, fleeing to the region of Midian where he spent the next 40 years in obscurity as a shepherd. During those decades in obscurity, the Lord performed spiritual surgery on Moses’ heart, preparing him for his life’s mission, and cultivating in Moses a heart of humility, trust, and willing submission to God. When the Lord spoke to Moses from the burning bush, Moses was so acutely aware of his past failure and his present inadequacies that he pled with God to choose, to use, to send someone else to bring the people of Israel out of Egypt. Moses, though, was the man of God’s choice. This time Moses knew it was not about him and his wisdom or skills as a leader. He knew it was about God, about *His* power and *His* leadership. No longer was Moses out to make a name for himself. No longer did he have an inflated view of himself or his importance. No longer did he think of himself as God’s gift to the world, or to the people of Israel. He simply wanted to be obedient to God and faithful to his calling.

And notice what the Lord says in verse 7 of His servant Moses: “He is faithful in all my house.” The writer of the Letter to the Hebrews in the New Testament picks up on this in demonstrating that the greatness of Jesus exceeds even the greatness of Moses. In Hebrews 3, where we are urged to fix our thoughts on Jesus (3:1), the Scripture says: “He (Jesus) was faithful to the One who appointed Him, just as Moses was faithful in all God’s house” (3:2) – a clear reference to Numbers 12:7. Hebrews 3 continues: “Jesus has been found worthy of greater honor than Moses, just as the builder of a house has greater honor than the house itself... Moses was faithful as a servant in all God’s house, testifying to what would be said in the future. But Christ is faithful as a Son over God’s house. And we are His house, if we hold on to our courage and the hope” we have in Him (3:3, 5-6).

We may say with confidence beyond a shadow of a doubt that Moses walked humbly with God. Though God gave him a position of enormous authority and responsibility, Moses did not let it go to his head. It took him years to learn it, but Moses came to understand and believe the life-changing truth that God did not need him, but he needed God. Desperately. And the same is true for you and me. God does not need me. God does not need you. But you and I need God. As desperately and completely as Moses needed Him. This, it seems to me, is one of the essential keys to cultivating true humility and walking humbly with God. May we, like Moses, learn to walk humbly with our God.

As laudatory and exemplary as Moses' humility was, it is not enough for us to aspire to be like him. Our hope of salvation is not in Moses. Moses is not the One in whom we trust. Our hope is found in Christ alone, who personified humility beyond all measure and comparison in giving His life on the cross as a sacrifice for us. The Most Humble Person Ever. And now He is exalted beyond all measure forever.

Lord, let it be so now and always, to the glory of Your name. Amen.