

EPIPHANY SUNDAY
ST. ANDREW'S PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
SANTA BARBARA, CA
JANUARY 8, 2012

ISAIAH 2: 12-17; JEREMIAH 9: 23-24; MATTHEW 18: 1-4

BEWARE OF THE SEVEN

I."PRIDE"

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In his classic book, *The Screwtape Letters*¹, author C.S. Lewis has us imagine a *senior* devil instructing a *junior* devil in the *art* of *coaxing* a human being *away* from God. The senior devil is named Screwtape, and the junior devil – his nephew – is called Wormwood. In chapter 14, Screwtape writes:

My dear Wormwood,

The most alarming thing in your last account of your "patient" is that he... has *become* humble. Have you *drawn his attention* to this fact? All virtues are less formidable to us *once the man is aware that he has them*, but this is *specially* true of *humility*. *Catch* him at the *moment* when he is *really* poor in spirit and *smuggle* into his mind the *gratifying reflection*, "By jove! *I'm* being *humble*," and *almost immediately* **pride** – pride at his *own humility* – will *appear*. *If he awakes* to the *danger* and tries to *smother* this *new* form of pride, make him *proud* of his *attempt* – and *so on*, through as *many stages* as you *please*....for through the virtue of *Humility*, [God] wants to *turn* a [person's] *attention* away from himself to [God] and *neighbor*.²

¹ C.S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1959).

² Pp. 62-63.

Why is *pride* one of the “Seven *Deadly Sins*”? Because it *strangles* “humility.” And Jesus said, “Whoever becomes *humble* like a *child* is *greatest* in the kingdom of heaven.”³ For you see, *those two things are equal*. “Greatest,” in *God’s eyes*, is being *humble* like a child. And “being *humble* like a *child*” – in *God’s eyes* – *is* being *greatest* in the kingdom of heaven.

Let me give you an example. *Last week* Anita, Leah and I met a young man named Marcin. We were on a *tour* of Munich called the Third Reich Tour – a detailing of the historical circumstances *and places* that led to Hitler’s rise, and eventual fall, in the ideology that came to be *known* as National Socialism.

Marcin was our tour guide. But you wouldn’t know it to look at him! In fact, when we gathered at the Munich train station for the tour, if Marcin hadn’t been wearing a *badge* that *said*, “Tour Guide” on it, we would have mistaken him for “just another *youth*” *waiting for a train*! *Even then*, we *couldn’t believe* that “this guy” was going to *lead* us on a 3 ½-hour *informational* walking tour of the city! All he had *with* him was a backpack, and he was dressed in *ratty* tennis shoes, slumping jeans, and an old stocking cap. And we were paying 12 Euros a piece for the tour!

But then, Marcin opened his mouth. Here’s what I *wrote* about him in my *travel journal* for the day, (quote):

He had a *fine* sense of humor, delivered with a *trademark* English accent. He was an absolute *repository* of information, without a *note* or *any reminder* in front of him. There were about twenty-eight people in our group. The walking tour lasted over three hours. It made me want to reread my books on Hitler and re-watch a German movie called “The

³ Matt. 18: 4.

White Rose” about the *student resistance* to the Nazi movement. (unquote)

You see, though Marcin was raised in England, he was born in Poland – one of the countries Hitler invaded. And though he had only intended to lead the Munich walking tours for *six months* (that was nearly *four years ago!*) to help defray the costs of being a struggling *jazz musician* (who, incidentally, *now* has 5 CD’s to his credit), *something happened* to Marcin’s *spirit* during those *six months*, in which he *also* began leading tours of the Dachau Concentration Camp. He was *inspired* by the *lives* of those who “stood up” to Hitler and *resisted* the Nazi juggernaut. You could *hear* it *in Marcin’s voice*, as he said to us *several times*, “*Resistance to evil always springs up in the most unlikely of places.*”

I think what Marcin was *saying* (from *firsthand* experience) was, “Resistance to wrong – *all* wrong: wrongdoing in the world and wrongdoing in ourselves – *starts* in *our hearts*. Resistance *springs up there* when we *least expect it* because we are *responding* to the *evil in the world* – and in our own lives – with *humility.*” And let’s be clear, *humility* is *not* “weakness.” Humility, to be *able* to “subdue pride” in our lives *must* be *strong*. And *when that humility is present*, God can *transform* us from *proud, selfish* people to *humble, giving* ones.

Isaiah says that a “day is on its way” when the Lord of the universe will finally, *firmly* stand “against *all that is proud and lofty*, against *all that is lifted up and high....The haughtiness* of people will be *humbled*, and the ‘*pride of everyone*’ will be *brought low*; and *God alone* will be *exalted* on that day.”⁴

So, adds Jeremiah, in *light* of this:

⁴ Is. 2: 12, 17.

The *wise* shouldn't boast in their *wisdom*;
 The *mighty* shouldn't boast in their *might*.
 And *neither* should the *wealthy* boast in their *wealth*.
 But *let those who boast* boast in *this*, says the Lord,
 That they *understand* and *know me*...
 For *I* act with steadfast *love*, *justice*, and *righteousness*,
 And *in these things* I *delight*.⁵

Pride, my friends, *resists service*. *Pride* *strangles* sacrifice. *Pride* *abhors* humility.

And *why*? Could it *be* because *humility* makes one *vulnerable*? Humility “opens one up” to *criticism*? Humility *exposes* oneself to hurt and pain. The *very person* who *said*, “Let the children *come* unto me,” and “You must *become* like a little child to enter the kingdom of heaven” was *himself* the God who *humbled himself* and *made himself obedient unto death*, even *death on a cross* so that we might be *lifted up* from our *lowly state* to *eternal life*.

Is *that* “gift of life” something for *us* to be *proud about* – or to be *humbled by*? If *pride* is the *first* of “the seven deadly sins,” doesn't that *indeed* make its *opposite*, *humility*, the *first* among the “life giving virtues”? To *quote* Uncle Screwtape *once more*:

[God] wants each [person], in the long run, to be able to recognize all creatures (even him or herself) as *glorious* and *excellent* things....to *restore* to them a *new kind* of *self-love* – a *charity* and *gratitude* for *all selves*, *including their own*; [for] *when* they have *really learned* to “love their neighbors *as themselves*,” they will be *allowed* to *love themselves as their neighbors*.⁶

⁵ Jer. 9: 23-24.

And *that* from a “*senior devil*” to his *young protégé*! How *much* we have to learn about *humility, sacrifice, and service* – about “becoming like children” in our *openness* and *trust* of God, *carrying around* in *our* lives *only a backpack* full of our *conviction* and *humble learning* so that *others*, through *our sacrifice*, might grow *closer* to the God of *justice* and *love*!

For the one who is *greatest* in the kingdom of heaven is *equal* to the *one* who *becomes humble* – *like a child*.

Amen.

⁶ Lewis, op. cit., pp. 64-65.