

Ephesians 4:1-6
Rev. Breedlove, August 5 2018

“Humility: Lessons From an Old Mountain Goat”

Mountain Goats . . .

An old mountain goat taught me one of the most important life lessons I’ve learned thus far. It was back when Amy and I were newly married; I was working a pair of part-time jobs, and was home on a lunch break. We had this super large (and monstrously heavy) ancient set top TV that we only could manually tune in 4 or 5 local broadcast T.V. stations. I turned to the PBS station and a nature show was on. It was an episode about the North America Rocky Mountain Goat (*Oreamnos americanus*). The show featured the keen agility and miraculous balance of these seemingly fearless critters; they made high altitude mountain traversing look like a casual stroll in the park.

The drama of the show ensued when two determined goats came from opposite directions along a narrow ledge (narrow for even for a nimble mountain goat), with each one wanting passage to the other side. The two goat would rize up on their hind legs and butt their horned heads with brute force and the cracking of their two heads sounded like a major league baseball player swinging a baseball bat against a brick wall. The stakes were life or death, one goat would win, and the other less fortunate one would fall off the steep treacherous ledge.

But then, there came along an old grizzly looking mountain Goat with bulging knobby knees and a long scraggly beard face to face with a young and strong billy. At this point, I was glued to the T.V. wondering who would win this deadly duel-- the young billy or the old and weathered goat. I reasoned that perhaps the older goat had seen a lot of ledge battles in its time and had a few wily tricks up its sleeve. The young billy aggressively bobbed his hard head up and down, and then something absolutely amazing happened-- the older veteran buckled down on to his front two knees and then gingerly laid down fully, and let the younger goat walk over him to safe passage! It’s a rare goat that humbles itself like that.

In the opening verses of Ephesians chapter 4, the writer exhorts the community of faith to live into their calling of faith, united by the bond of peace; to accomplish such unity, the community of faith are encouraged to live their lives, “. . . **with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love . . .**”

For that period of time, first century, “**humility**” was a uniquely Christian virtue; the people of the first century would’ve been well familiar with the philosophical (stoicism) and Roman set of virtues common in that day and age: wisdom, morality, courage, and moderation; the listing of humility, gentleness (meekness), and patience in Ephesians 4:2 could’ve very well had in

mind the (and served as a counter to) the philosophical and Roman values of that day. Both Moses and Jesus were revered by early Christian communities as persons of humility.

“**Gentleness**”, or meekness in other translations, was the idea of a domesticated strength; I like to think of the idea of a domesticated horse here. A horse is a strong and swift animal, but a horse that is trained and tamed is a mighty power and strength under control-- such is the idea of “gentleness”; it is power and strength at ease, so as not to railroad over one another. In Pauline theology, being gentle with one another is the same thing as not oppressively imposing one’s power and strength over another.

“**Patience**” is one of Paul’s favorite manifestations of faith to encourage Christians to live by, (Rom. 2:4; 9:22; 2 Cor. 6:6; Gal. 5:22; Col. 1:11; 3:12; 1 Tim. 1:16; 2 Tim. 3:10; 4:2). Being patient with one another is akin to giving another the benefit of the doubt; we scarcely can know, or imagine, the trauma, depression, stress and situations that others mask or are tormented by when they walk into church on any given Sunday morning, therefore, be gentle and humble with one another-- such is the heartbeat of a health community of faith.

Rodney Stark in his book, *The Rise of Christianity*, remarks that the early Christian communities lived and practiced their faith in such a compassionate and caring way (i.e. humility, gentleness, patience, love), and that was what served as a catalyst for the rapid growth and rise of early christianity. For example, in the early period of Christianity, when plagues drove away those with the means to escape the spread of disease, Christians would stay behind and care for and nurse the sick. Such loving concern resulted in numerous conversions. When those that had fled the plague returned to their communities, the previously sick that had been cared for and nursed back to health by the Christian community were added to the number of Christians. “Bearing with one another in love” is a powerful evangelism.

“Unity”, within the church, is a theme throughout the book of Ephesians, and it again is echoed in the liturgical rhythm of verses 5-6: “one body . . . one Spirit . . . one Lord . . . one baptism . . . one God . . .” Such unity is won by humility, gentleness, and patience, and in bearing together in the peaceful bond of love.

If an old mountain goat can learn and show humility, then hopefully, we too, can learn to live out our faith in the community and unity of the church, “ . . . **with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love . . .** ”. **Amen.**