What is the greatest virtue of all? Someone put this question to St. Augustine. “Humility,” he answered. “And the second greatest?” his questioner asked. “Humility,” he said. And the third? Again St. Augustine answered, “Humility.”

The most humble man ever to grace this poor world of ours was Jesus Christ, our Lord; God’s own, original model of what it means to be a true human being. Listen as the New Testament tells of this most humble of all men!

“Have this mind among yourselves, which you have in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross.” (Philippians 2:5-8).

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Is humility really the greatest of all virtues? If we think it’s not, maybe it’s because it’s been misunderstood? So please note that the humility of Jesus has nothing to do with cowardice or servility, nor does humility mean slouching around with no self-confidence. Jesus held his head high and ‘marched breast forward” because he knew who he was. He knew he possessed ultimate dignity because he belonged to his Father in heaven and nothing could take that away from him. This was the source of his amazing self-confidence which was always on the side of truth. How different from us whose self-confidence is built upon ourselves, on our achievements, our knowledge, our skills, and our assumed power! Of course, we believe God gives us dignity and worth but we’d never put this on a job application. But because Jesus knew he was his Father’s Son he never had to be defensive when faced with rejection and misunderstanding. And as for courage, he could face the cries of an angry mob, the false accusations of the religious hierarchy, and the unspeakable cruelty of Roman justice without wavering. What a man, what a maker of men: this most humble man ever to grace our proud world!

But if humility is the greatest of the virtues, doesn’t this contradict the primacy of love? How do we square Augustine’s claim with Paul’s words at the end of his magnificent Thirteenth Chapter of First Corinthians? You all know those words! “And now abideth faith, hope and love, these three, but the greatest of these is love.” Not a word about humility! But what if Saint Augustine knew that humility is the foundation for all Christian virtues? What if Christian faith and Christian hope and Christian love can only grow out of the fertile soil of Christ-like humility?

Put on your theological thinking caps because we need to get this straight. It’s the difference between pseudo Christianity and true Christianity. Any faith, any hope, any love that
is not rooted in humility is false faith, false hope, false love. After all, if my faith is my own
doing and my decision, then I guess I deserve the benefits of believing and can be rather proud of
my stalwart faith and uncompromising religious certainties. If my hope grows out of biological
need for survival and a determination to rise above whatever the future hurls at me, then I guess I
am the captain of my fate and can be quite proud that my head may be bloody but unbowed. If
love grows out of what I want of others, and if others respond because I’m such a delightful
chap, then I guess I can be quite proud that I am who I am. So if faith and hope and love are all
my doing, God is secondary if not irrelevant. Faith and hope and love then are not God’s gifts
but my achievements. Only humility enables me to be open to receive what God alone can give:
the gift of faith, the gift of hope, the gift of love. Do you see now why humility is the greatest of
all virtues? And if we do see, do we then have the courage to see the many devious ways pride
makes humility a stranger to our very proper and very successful middle-class lives?

Jesus’ radical humility was revolutionary; he turned the world upside down. Everything
about him was a repudiation of pride, of self-assertion, of greed, of lust for power, of passion to
get even with those who wrong us, not to mention the unholy confidence that nothing is
impossible for us. Roman culture was built on these herd values. In order to succeed you had to
live by these values, for only strength and wealth and power over others won respect, and you
had to win respect if you hoped to accomplish your dreams. Jesus’ humility was a repudiation of
a world built on such values. No wonder he had to be silenced. It was not because people were
more sinful than we that they silenced him. Of course they had their ‘Hitlers’ and ‘Stalins,’ only
they were named Nero and Caligula. They also had more than their share of lazy parasites, the
 corrupt, and the ambitious who’d violate any standard of decency and trample on any friend in
order to get ahead. But they also had good and honorable people of low and high estate who did
their jobs, cared for their families, and dreamed of a better future. But neither despicable nor
decent citizens could tolerate him because his radical humility was a deadly threat to the patriotic
and cultural values upon which their lives were built.

Are we different? We still silence him by relegating him to our musty old churches or to
our flashy modern churches so his radical humility won’t escape into the world and interfere
with our strict racial and social divisions, our economic values, and our political idolatries. Do
we honestly believe that humility is the greatest of all the virtues? To say so in public would be
a knee-slapping joke on the David Letterman show were it not such a terrible judgment on what
we take as important.

Gilbert K. Chesterton, writing in the last century, understood how we’ve safely locked
the doors of our lives to keep this Jesus on the lonely outside with his radical humility. “It has to
be confessed,” he wrote, “that after nineteen centuries the revolutionary Christian trans-value
ation of all values has still not been accepted and that self-assertion is still counted a virtue, even in
the churches. (Chesterton, Mary for All Ages, page 44.)

May I expose some of our denial of Jesus’ humility? We call ourselves a Christian nation;
this may be true in name but hardly in reality. Would any red-blooded American give one
moment’s attention to politicians who don’t blather on and on about their achievements, their
ability to solve all problems, and their clever ways of assigning all blame for everything that is
wrong on their opponent? Would any red-blooded American give one moment’s attention to
politicians humble enough to honor and praise the achievements of political opponents? And
would politicians, humble as Jesus was humble, get one dime in campaign contributions? They’d
not be respected, and everyone knows you can’t win elections if you’re not respected as a strong
winner who knows how to bend the truth and the people in order to win. And again I want to say that neither we nor our politicians are despicable, evil sinners.

I step back and look at what I’m saying, and I sound like a judgmental Pharisee, a vile misanthrope, but honestly I’m not. We are no more evil than Canadians or Icelanders. It’s simply that this is the way the system works and we’re held captive to it. Even the church is held captive to this value system, and clergy know they won’t get a call beyond that “little brown church in the dell” unless they’re ambitious and self-assertive. I know. Even so we must strive to do the best we can. But we’d better not take too much credit for it; we owe too many debts to others for whatever we achieve. Besides, who wants to join a church that gives no evidence of worldly success? Who wants to join a humble church, whatever that means? It never occurs to us that surrendering to such a value system is a betrayal of the humility of Jesus and a denial of the humility he wants of us.

One more exposé of our denial of Jesus and the humility of God who sent him among us! I occasionally take note of letters to the editor in our local newspaper, assuming to tell the poor and unemployed how they can become successful. Though there are variations, the main theme is always the same: “My parents were poor immigrants who came to these shores, overcame obstacles, worked and saved. They taught me to work hard and never to make excuses, and I achieved the great American dream. Anyone else can do the same if they want to.” The writers of such letters would be shocked if someone pointed out that words are spawned by inordinate pride and a total lack of humility, believing everyone should be like them. The prophet Hosea once lamented, “My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge.” (Hosea 4:6). It may well be that lacking the knowledge to discern our true and hidden motives as well as our inability to see their implications may be the most destructive form of moral ignorance.

I want to end this homily with a simple story that casts the light of goodness and humility on the ways of darkness that hold us all in thrall. It’s about my late mother-in-law, Dorothy Shaw MacLeod. Some of you knew her. In 1948 she became the Executive Secretary of United Church Women of the National Council of Churches, representing Protestant women in America. In that post she traveled the globe, meeting kings and queens and church leaders from around the world. When she retired and moved to Roanoke she joined Second Presbyterian Church. Ten years later she had to move to South Roanoke Nursing Home. She had a photograph taken with President Dwight Eisenhower. We wanted to hang it in her room, but she quietly declined. And this is what she said: “I do not want the good people who care for me to think that I am better than they.” She did not want to be known for her achievements and fame, but only for her gentleness and her appreciation of all who cared for her.

We look at a world enslaved by systems of pride and self-aggrandizement, a world in which humility seems a lost cause that can change nothing. But, here and there, quiet witnesses to Jesus Christ light a candle to his humility, and so long as there are such unheralded saints there is hope. Yes, hope: millennia of arrogance and power and coercion have not worked. And we never learn. What if the practice of humility might really be the way God intends for us to right the wrongs of this errant world?

As we eat this bread and drink this cup, we bear silent witness to the humility of Jesus that may make us willing to receive and use God’s priceless gifts of faith, hope and love.