

**“I Love Me”
Luke 22:24-30**

Dr. Mark W. Jennings

November 21, 2010 Christ the King

Next Sunday is the first Sunday in Advent, can you believe it? That means that this Saturday the deacons and any of you who want to help (doughnuts and coffee provided, 9 a.m.), will be decorating the church, so when you come to church next Sunday the trees will be up, candles and wreaths in the windows and nativity figures set up in the fireplace room. That means you are going to start to look around at your neighbor's houses and see if they have their tree and lights up yet, and wonder how long can you get away with it before you need to put yours up? And it also means that *they* will start to arrive soon. You know what I mean, you can tell as soon as you feel the envelope. It's not just a Christmas card, but it's a card with one of *those letters* in it. You open it up and you read: "It's been just another normal year here at the Smith's house, though we did add on an addition to the house with a pool, an exercise room, and a home theater with seating for fifty. School continues to go well for Junior. He will graduate from Yale this December, a semester early so he can join the Peace Corps right away, although he'll have to put off his Rhodes Scholarship for a couple of years until he gets back from digging water wells in Mongolia. Julie made all-state in volleyball again but she is having some difficulty deciding whether she wants take the full ride scholarship to go to Harvard or Stanford to college. Of course we'll look forward to visiting her in either Boston or San Francisco. We'll have the time to do that now since Jim's software company was bought out by Microsoft and he took that really golden parachute and retired at 45. You might have seen him on TV as a 12 time winner on

Jeopardy! It was fun to see him but it gave us an even better feeling donating all the money to the Humane Society. Jim and I will keep busy visiting the kids and traveling to see the 8 exchange students we've hosted over the years. I guess we just have family all around the world! Hope your Christmas and New Years are just as wonderful as ours!"

Now obviously, I just made that all up. But you know what I mean, you get letters like that right? I'm always tempted to wait and send out a Groundhog's day letter saying, "Thanks for your Christmas card, but so many things have gone wrong this year that we're just going to crawl back into our hole and hope for six more weeks of winter." But I won't, I don't think. When you get a letter like that, how do you feel? Does it make you envious? Do you wish your life was like that? Do are you offended at their pride? I mean do they have to flaunt it like that? What do you feel when you hear boasting like that?

Pride, that the deadly sin we are talking about today. This is the last in our series about the seven deadly sins and on most every list you will see it is pride that has the top place. Many philosophers and theologians consider pride to be the mother of all sin. For once I can agree with St. Thomas when he says that "Pride is inordinate self-love and the cause of every sin—the root of pride is found to consist in man not being, in some way, subject to God and his rule."

But isn't pride a good thing? Don't we tell our children that they should be proud of their accomplishments? Don't we want them to feel good about themselves? Aren't you proud at times and isn't that a good feeling? Pride is loving yourself, right? Is that bad? Jesus tells us to love our neighbors as we love ourselves. Isn't it a given that we *do* love ourselves? That doesn't mean that I spend a couple of hours a day in front of a

mirror admiring just how darn good looking I am, but I'm not supposed to despise myself either. Buechner again says, "Loving your neighbor as you love yourself means simply that the ability to work for your own good despite all the less than admirable things you know about yourself is closely related to the ability to work for your neighbor's good despite all the less than admirable things you know about him." Loving your neighbor is a good thing, and so is loving yourself, being proud of yourself. If someone can be described as a "proud" person, that's not necessarily a bad thing. I'm proud. I'm proud of what I've done. I'm not proud of everything I've done, but there are some things that I'm proud of. I'm also proud of my wife and my children. I want people to know that this is my family. I'm proud of my church. I want people to know that I'm the pastor of the congregation of the Presbyterian Church of Richland. Those are all good things, but pride can turn sinful when it turns into comparisons with others. It is when I try to use my pride to belittle someone else. The disciples were arguing with each other about which of them was the greatest. I'm sure that's just what Jesus wanted to hear on his last night with them. He must have wondered if they had been listening to anything he had said over the last three years. If my pride leads me to put someone else down in trying to be greater than they are, or if I am resentful because I am not greater than they are, then my pride or my self-love has become sinful. Self love is sinful when instead of leading you to share with others the self you love, you are more interested in protecting yourself and building yourself up by putting another down. Pride can be both a blessing and a curse.

When the disciples begin to argue about which one of them is the greatest, Jesus turns the argument on its head by saying that it is the one who serves who is the greatest.

Of course he himself is the example. It is Jesus who washes their feet. When we look at his entry into Jerusalem, the crowds, and probably the disciples too, were wanting to proclaim him king, which might have precipitated a violent confrontation with the Roman authorities. But he doesn't enter the city as a conquering king, he enters the city humble and riding on a donkey. He comes not as a military king, not as a victor, but as a servant king, a king who leads by the power of his example. This king is humble.

This is the way it is supposed to be among us, his followers, he says. The leaders among us should be the ones who serve. One of the people I think of when Jesus speaks of this is Father Damien. He was born in Belgium but as a young priest he was sent by the Catholic Church to serve in Hawaii in 1863. Not a bad appointment, right? But when Father Damien arrived he found that the islands were in the midst of a terrible outbreak of leprosy. Hundreds were catching this disfiguring and fatal disease. And this was in a day when leprosy was still thought to be caused by sexual immorality. Lepers were seen by many as both physical and spiritual outcasts.

Father Damien arrived in Hawaii as officials there began to collect the lepers and exile them to the island of Molokai. Stranded there with only the barest essentials and no medical care, many quickly died. Father Damien protested and in 1873 the church allowed him to move himself to Molokai and establish Kalapapa, a colony for lepers. He built a church, hospital, homes and a school. He recruited doctors and nurses. He pestered the church and the government to provide funds. He sought research into the causes of the disease and argued it wasn't caused by sexual immorality. Most of all, Father Damien refused to be afraid of his parish of lepers. He touched and hugged them even though he knew the risk.

In 1883, he began to feel a tingling in his leg—and soon discovered that he too had contracted leprosy. His superiors in the Church and government accused him of sexual immorality, but allowed him to remain of Kalapapa, since no other parish would accept a priest with leprosy. For the next six years, he labored to build the colony into a place of comfort and compassion. Then, on April 2, 1889, he died of complications from his disease.

If you go to Washington D.C. one of the place people most often visit is the Capitol building. In that grand building is a large hall and in that hall each state is allowed to place two, but only two, statues of people who have been heroes to their state. In 1959 when Hawaii became the 50th state it added the last two statues to Statuary Hall, one of the legendary King Kamehamea and a statue of Father Damien. Was Damien proud of what he had done? No one knows, but his people were proud of him. The cure for sinful pride, for self-aggrandizement is humility. Father Damien had that, because he was a subject of the humble king, our King Jesus.

When you get a Christmas letter, don't let pride get the best of you. The letter I made up at the beginning of this sermon is not one filled with sinful pride. It is our pride that makes us feel resentful when we get a letter like that. When you send your Christmas letter, what is your motivation? To share your news, to share your joy, to share your sorrows? Or do you want people to be envious? In this way pride and envy are close together. That's the trap of sinful pride, it wants to generate envy in others. See how much better I am than you? See how accomplished our children are and therefore what great parents we must be? Don't you wish you were us? Look at our church, we're the oldest congregation in Kalamazoo County, as if survival were a source of pride. But

we're proud of our church, aren't we? Do we say, look at us, we're better than they are? But we're not going to share the pain, the doubts, the arguments that are a part of any human relationships, be it in a family or a congregation. Humility rejoices when another rejoices, weeps when another sorrows. Humility reads these Christmas letters and knows that they don't really matter. Humility wants to care for the ones who wrote, is not envious, but is a servant to all. When Jesus washed the disciples feet he gave us the example of discipleship. He wasn't ashamed to do it, to be humble, but did it in the security of his self love and of his father's love for him. Humility is not thinking poorly of yourself, it's just not thinking too much about yourself at all, because you are not comparing yourself to another. There will always be people better and worse off than we are. To compare ourselves to others just opens the door to haughtiness and resentment—that's sinful pride. So when you get that letter this Christmas and want to clench your teeth, see if you can get your teeth to smile and thank God for their blessings, and then count some of your own.