

# Sermon Note: Humble Faith

## Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost

### Introduction

As we conclude our stewardship series **Standing on the Shoulders of Giants**, we meet two more unnamed figures—a tax collector who prays for mercy and a woman who anoints Jesus with oil. As unnamed characters, we might expect them to have minimal influence, to be nearly forgettable. Instead, these two leave behind profound teaching. Looking back over this series, anonymous figures have illustrated the nature of complete faith. An unnamed disciple asked for greater faith. An unnamed Samaritan turned back to give thanks. An unnamed widow cried out for justice. The tax collector and the woman with oil show us once again the power of sacrifice without the need or expectation of recognition.

### Illustration Videos

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T5OhkFY1PQE>

In this trailer from *The Two Popes* (2019), Cardinal Jorge Bergoglio and Pope Benedict XVI wrestle with change, calling, and what it means to serve faithfully.

### Why This Video?

This trailer from *The Two Popes* (2019) highlights two leaders facing transition. Their conversations shift between disagreement and curiosity, between what has been and what could be. Their words show the weight of tradition, responsibility, and change. In their differences, we see both humor and moments of quiet, and we see understanding begin to form. For both of these leaders, vulnerability and humility show as the truest strengths of their leadership.

### Video Discussion Questions

1. The trailer opens with a small exchange about an oregano plant and being “yourself.” What tone does that set for their relationship, and how does it frame what follows?
2. The line “Does a shepherd run away when the wolves appear?” is heard alongside headlines about scandal. How does that pairing shape your sense of Pope Benedict’s struggle?
3. When Cardinal Bergoglio says, “Popes can’t resign,” and Pope Benedict interrupts—“Silence! I cannot play this role anymore”—what do you notice in the Pope’s voice and body language?
4. “God always corrects one pope by presenting the world with another pope.” How does that line shape your sense of what’s happening in the shots that follow (cardinals, closed doors, white smoke)?
5. Several comments touch on leadership: “Reform needs a politician...” “The most important qualification is not wanting to be leader.” “It’s 1.2 billion believers.” Which line stayed with you, and why?
6. There’s a moment of humor as Pope Benedict and Cardinal Bergoglio talk in the Garden. When Bergoglio suggests that God can be found “on the journey,” the Pope responds, “Perhaps we’ll find

God over there, on the journey. I'll introduce you to him." How does that moment of laughter and ease change the way you see their relationship? What might it suggest about humility and friendship?

7. Notice the pauses and moments of humor. Where do you see openness or vulnerability begin to appear between them?
8. The trailer closes with, "Being pope, you must remember that you are not God. You're only human." How does that sentence reframe what you've just seen? What kind of leadership does it point toward?

### **Matthew 26:6-13 (CEB)**

<sup>6</sup>When Jesus was at Bethany visiting the house of Simon, who had a skin disease, <sup>7</sup>a woman came to him with a vase made of alabaster containing very expensive perfume. She poured it on Jesus' head while he was sitting at dinner. <sup>8</sup>Now when the disciples saw it they were angry and said, "Why this waste? <sup>9</sup>This perfume could have been sold for a lot of money and given to the poor."

<sup>10</sup>But Jesus knew what they were thinking. He said, "Why do you make trouble for the woman? She's done a good thing for me. <sup>11</sup>You always have the poor with you, but you won't always have me. <sup>12</sup>By pouring this perfume over my body she's prepared me to be buried. <sup>13</sup>I tell you the truth that wherever in the whole world this good news is announced, what she's done will also be told in memory of her."

### **Luke 18:9-14 (CEB)**

<sup>9</sup>Jesus told this parable to certain people who had convinced themselves that they were righteous and who looked on everyone else with disgust: <sup>10</sup>"Two people went up to the temple to pray. One was a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. <sup>11</sup>The Pharisee stood and prayed about himself with these words, 'God, I thank you that I'm not like everyone else—crooks, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. <sup>12</sup>I fast twice a week. I give a tenth of everything I receive.' <sup>13</sup>But the tax collector stood at a distance. He wouldn't even lift his eyes to look toward heaven. Rather, he struck his chest and said, 'God, show mercy to me, a sinner.' <sup>14</sup>I tell you, this person went down to his home justified rather than the Pharisee. All who lift themselves up will be brought low, and those who make themselves low will be lifted up."

### **Scripture Study Questions**

1. In the Luke text, Jesus tells this parable to some who "trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt." What does that reveal about these listeners? Do we see similar attitudes today?
2. Two people go to the temple to pray—a Pharisee and a tax collector. What stands out to you about their prayers? What do their words and body language suggest about their posture toward God and others?
3. What does true humility look like? How is it different from self-hatred or low self-worth?
4. Where do we see spiritual practices or religious spaces used to elevate some and exclude others? What would faith rooted in humility and mercy look like in those same spaces?
5. In Matthew, the woman who anoints Jesus is criticized for her generosity. How do her actions expand our understanding of humility and devotion?

6. Jesus says that wherever the good news is told, her story will be remembered. What kind of legacy does her act leave, and how might our own gifts tell a story of humble faith?
7. Both stories center on honest offerings—one a prayer for mercy, one a costly act of love. How do these moments invite us to consider the spirit behind our giving and worship?

### **Additional (Optional) Questions**

1. What did the Pharisee and the tax collector pray for in this parable? How do they reveal different understandings of prayer and faith?
2. Why do you think Jesus told this story about prayer?
3. Have you ever heard—or prayed—a prayer that reminded you of either person in this parable? What do you remember about that period in your life? How do you feel about that prayer looking back?
4. Jesus says the tax collector went home “justified” but the Pharisee did not. What do you think that means?
5. How can we ensure our prayers are genuine and humble, rather than self-righteous or prideful?
6. In Matthew, the woman who anoints Jesus acts out of gratitude while others criticize her. How do you see humility in her actions?
7. What connections do you see between her act of devotion and the tax collector’s honest prayer?
8. How might humility shape the way we give, serve, or pray in our community life?

### **Weekly Action**

This week, let giving be an act of prayer. Take time to consider what you have to offer—your time, your care, your resources, and your spirit. Give something quietly, with gratitude in response to everything that has been entrusted to you. As part of this practice, you might pray over the pledge card you received in the mail and the commitments it represents. When you’re ready, fill it out and return it to the church office. Each and every gift offered in faith—whether it’s large or small—joins a story of humble and grace-filled love that continues through us.

### **Prayer**

Merciful God, you honor the prayer that is whispered. You lift up the ones who feel unworthy. Do not let us forget the altar we built—where grace is the only requirement, and humility is the holiest gift we bring. Teach us to see as you see. Teach us to love without needing to impress. And when we forget who we are, remind us: we are the ones you welcomed with open arms, not because we earned it—but because we showed up. Amen.

*Disclosure: This Sermon Note was created by LJUMC staff with resources from Discipleship Ministries of The United Methodist Church and with the support of AI tools.*