

# Being Me at the Airport

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*Matthew 11:29*

*Take My yoke upon you, and learn from Me,  
for I am gentle and humble in heart;  
and you shall find rest for your souls.*

Here's a true story about a horrible/wonderful experience. A disfigured stranger at the airport gave me a close glimpse of the profound difference between humiliation and humility. He reminded me of Jesus. He was at ease with himself. He lived out humility: not trying to be more than he was ... not settling for less than he was. His example furthered my own journey from a pervasive sense of shame to knowing that God has given each of us – including me, including you – unassailable and unchanging dignity.

## **Some Background**

You need to know three things about me before this story will make sense: I have allergies, I loathe humiliation, and I was going to take a trip.

First the allergies. Every so often my allergies go crazy and I get a very sore throat and lose my voice. My voice doesn't just get quiet; it goes away. Completely. People laugh and tell me how great it must be for my husband, living with a wife who can't talk. Ha, ha. Ha, ha. Ha. I don't laugh with them, partly because I don't find it very funny and partly because it would hurt to laugh. I do at times manage a weak smile.

When the kids were little and my voice was gone I would be the only mom in the neighborhood standing at the front door banging a spoon on a pan to call my kids in for dinner. Yelling was not an option, and mouthing words out the front door does not get kids from the end of the block to the dining room table.

All this was frustrating. And also embarrassing. That's the second thing you need to know: I flinch when I even think about being humiliated publicly. Standing out like a sore thumb, being different (as in weird), calling negative attention to myself – I loathe them all. Which brings me to my trip.

I'd arranged to take a trip. My husband (the one supposedly thrilled that I couldn't talk) was in England on business and I (still in the States) intended to join him after his work was done. His side of the ocean was doing well, but my side of the ocean, specifically the allergy part, was acting up. I was a mess. I could talk a little, but had to cover my face with a mask, a big ugly conspicuous charcoal mask, whenever I left my air-filtered house. Home was no problem; home was my cocoon. But travel was something else altogether. Staring observers lurked in every airport, airplane, hotel, and tourist site. Travel scared me stiff.

You'd think, assuming a modicum of normalcy on my part, that I'd worry about the trip because I might get a lot sicker. That did cross my mind, but only as a minor issue. My real alarm centered on wearing that bizarre mask in public and having people stare at me. I knew it would happen. Every time I thought about it I started to sweat.

## **The Parallel Plot**

In another part of my life, parallel to all this agitation, I was looking at Matthew 11 – the part where Jesus was saying He was humble in heart. I began pondering the idea of humble and trying to figure out how that worked. How exactly does one “do” humble? How did Jesus “do” humble?

I started going over the Gospel stories and His humility was easy to see. Jesus never tried to be more than He was and never tried to do more than He was supposed to be doing; He showed His disciples what it meant to serve as He washed their feet; He comfortably ate dinner with people whom the elite hypocrites avoided; rather than using His power to call for angels to rescue Him, He submitted to the cross. Humility upon humility.

But then there was the other part. Jesus didn't just avoid more; He also avoided less. I started going through the Gospel stories again and found incident after incident where Jesus could have settled for being less than He was and He wouldn't do it, even when people got really angry with Him. Pilate asked Him if He were the Son of God and He said "Yes." People worshiped Him and He accepted it – even though He knew that only God should be worshiped. He stood openly on the mountain and gave Peter and John and James an unveiled view of His glory. He even applied God's name (I AM) to Himself. Is this humility upon humility? Yes it is.

Jesus' behavior unsettles our psyche because we think humility requires walking slowly with eyes on the ground and head hanging. Going around claiming He was God sounds not humble but mockingly proud. Unless it's true. If it's true then Jesus isn't putting on airs; He's simply agreeing with the reality of who He is. And no less.

Jesus never claimed privilege and He always asserted truth. Both eating with sinners and claiming His glory show us His heart. He never strove for more than He was, and never settled for less than He was. He was who He was, and that's all. No more, and no less. What a humble, true – and odd – way to live.

### **Living Oddly**

No more, no less. I loved it. The whole concept was extraordinarily restful. And it seemed entirely unrelated to this trip looming before me. I was wrong.

I had a decision to make. Would I go or would I stay? Go out in public or hide? Deal with stares or keep myself out of sight and comfortable? I had to choose, and pretty quickly; we had two more days to either cancel or confirm my ticket

I've learned that when I have trouble making a decision it usually comes down to one of two problems: either I don't have enough information (not the problem this time) or I'm unwilling to cooperate with one of the alternatives. God started asking me pertinent questions. *Are you willing to stay home?* Yes! *Are you willing to go?* That's when I started resisting. *Are you willing to go if I want you to go?* I struggled and hemmed and hawed and sweated, knowing all the time that I'd end up yielding – I hate defying God much more than I hate being stared at. People's approval is merely comforting; His approval is necessary. *Are you willing to go if I want you to go? Yes, if You want me to, I'll go.* Once I yielded the choice was quite clear. Still distressing, but clear – I'd learned humiliation all too well. I was about to learn humility.

I started packing dark clothes so I would be less noticeable. The clothes matched my mood. Then it struck me – no more, no less. Just like Jesus. I didn't have to be more than a person wearing a bizarre mask, and I didn't have to be less than a woman made glorious by God. I took out a bright outfit for the plane ride. (I also chose a matching scarf to wrap around my mask. I decided my camouflage looked quite stylish.)

### **Being Me at the Airport**

Burdened with three pieces of luggage (and some serious anxiety) I parked the car, wrapped my stylish scarf over my mask, and started my long walk to the gate. It was horrible. Every few yards, every few seconds or so, the strap on my heavy wardrobe bag would slip off my shoulder, my scarf would slip off

my mask, people would stare at me like I was a carnival freak, and my hold on dignity would just slip away. And I'd have to stop to rearrange my luggage and my scarf and my grasp on who I was.

I kept re-teaching myself humility: *I don't have to be more than I am; I don't have to be less than I am.* And my awareness of inner dignity would return for a few more yards and a few more seconds. Then it would happen again: bag slipping, scarf slipping, dignity slipping; bag repositioned, scarf rearranged, identity reclaimed.

I didn't have any dollar bills to rent a cart and no one offered to help. The airport strangers just stared. And I kept walking my public gauntlet – alone except for God and Matthew 11. It seemed like miles to the gate.

Then a tall lanky man with an easy smile came up to me and asked if I wanted help with some of my luggage. “Oh yes, thanks a lot. I really would.” I had to work to speak up since the mask muffled my already quiet voice. It didn't seem to bother him at all. He said he was meeting some people arriving later but had plenty of time to walk me to my gate. He put the heavy wardrobe bag on his left shoulder and I walked on his right. As we walked and chatted I mentioned how bizarre it was to be stared at and that I'd never been treated as an object before. It was a light conversation in spite of the subject, particularly since his easy way thoroughly relaxed me. He seemed to understand.

When we finally arrived at my gate I thanked him for his help and he turned away to go meet his friends. That's when I saw his left arm. It ended halfway down with a spray of fingers coming out of his elbow. He knew. Knew about being different, about being seen as a freak, about being treated like an object instead of a person. He'd experienced it himself.

I never noticed if people were staring (at him or at me) when we were walking together; I was too busy enjoying his company. But I bet they were staring, and I bet it was at both of us. He knew all too well about people's degrading stares and about walking through those stares with dignity. With dignity. Not with hiding, not with humiliation, not with shame, but with humble dignity. He'd learned humility: he didn't have to be more than he was and he didn't have to be less than he was. Neither did Jesus. And neither do I.

No more ...no less. Oh Lord, You sent me such a humble teacher, so perfect for my need. Sometimes I wonder ... did you send me angel?

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