

## **“THE SACRAMENT OF HUMILITY”**

**Readings: Proverbs 25:6-7**

**Luke 14:1, 7-14**

A STORY IS told about man who was awarded an honorary degree from a prestigious university. That night, as he was getting ready for bed he turned to his wife and said, “I wonder how many truly great men there are in the world.” To which she replied, “One less than you think.”

Whatever happened to humility? There was a time when it was one of the most practiced and appreciated of all the Christian virtues. Not so any more. These days we are taught to admire the person who “knows how to get ahead” and isn’t afraid to “promote himself.” In fact, not to do so is almost looked upon as a sign of weakness.

This morning’s Gospel lesson from Luke however, begs to differ. In it we heard Jesus give some practical advice about how to behave at a wedding banquet. “Do not sit down at the place of honor,” he said, “in case someone more distinguished than you has been invited by your host; and your host has to come up to you and say, ‘Give this person your place,’ and then in disgrace you have to start by taking the lowest place. Instead, begin by taking the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he may say to you, ‘Friend, move up higher’; then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at the table with you. For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”

Unfortunately, we live in a culture where people would much rather exalt themselves than humble themselves. Professional athletes, rappers, movie stars and TV evangelists often tend to think more highly of themselves that they probably should. It’s hard to pinpoint when it all started. Perhaps it was with the

boxer Mohammad Ali back in the 1960's when he used to exclaim, "I am the greatest!"

Whatever the origin there's no doubt that humility has been in short supply lately. Not long ago, I saw a poll that said over 80 percent of respondents answered "Yes" when asked whether they regarded themselves to be an important person. By way of contrast, when the same poll was conducted in 1980 only 15 percent of the respondents replied in the affirmative.

What does that say about our contemporary culture? On the positive side I suppose it could mean that we have a better sense of self worth than we did thirty years ago. On the other hand, it could also mean that humility is a thing of the past.

My hunch is that most of are not as great as we think we are when things are go well or as bad as we think we are when things are going poorly. The secret is learning how to keep a positive outlook and a humble demeanor at the same time. This is what Martin Buber was trying to get at when he said, "We should always go around with a piece of paper in each pocket. On one it should read, 'I am dust and ashes.' On the other, 'For me the world was created.'"

We don't want to think too highly of ourselves, but we don't want to think too poorly of ourselves either. Isn't life after all, about trying to strike a balance?

One group of people who understand the need to maintain the right balance are professional baseball players. Baseball is a game where even the best players make an out seventy percent of the time. It's also a long (162 games) season. As a result you don't want to get too excited if your team is in first place in April nor too low if your team is in last place in July. You also don't want to get too high on yourself if you hit two homeruns one game because you are just as apt to strike out four times with the bases loaded the next game.

Professional baseball players have to have enough confidence to be able to go out each day thinking they can be successful, but they also have to have enough humility to know that they are not going to successful every time up. It's just not the way the game works.

Neither is it the way life works, which is one thing Jesus was trying to get across to his disciples in today's Gospel reading. Why not start with realistic goals and humble expectations rather than unrealistic goals and an inflated sense of your abilities? That way if you exceed expectations you have nowhere to go but up. On the other hand, if you fail to meet expectations, you have nowhere to go but down.

I heard a story once about a young Scottish preacher who was sure he had just written the best sermon ever. However, upon delivering it, he could tell by the look on the faces of his parishioners that it wasn't quite the "masterpiece" he thought it was. As he came down the steps of the pulpit one of the deacons said to him, "Ah, laddie, if ye had only gone up the way ye came down, then ye might have come down the way ye went up."

How much better to humble ourselves and end up being exalted, then to exalt ourselves and end up being humbled!

Jesus' call to humility pertains just as much to nations as it does to individuals. The United States is a great nation but it has not always been a humble nation. Following the battle of San Juan Hill, Teddy Roosevelt exuded, "Look at all these damned Spanish dead! It is our destiny to swallow up the land of all adjoining nations to weak to withstand us."

During the middle of the Viet Nam War Senator William Fulbright wrote a book entitled, *The Arrogance of Power*. It was a searing criticism of U.S. foreign policy, a policy, which in his view, relied far too heavily on the belief that every other country wanted look and act the same way we do. Sadly, forty years later, we find ourselves making some of the same faulty assumptions we made back then.

We need to keep a couple of things in mind however, when the Bible talks about humility. The first is that we should never confuse real humility with false humility. A story is told about a Rabbi who used to get down on his knees, beat his breast, and proclaim, "I'm nobody. I'm nobody." The Cantor saw him do it one day, so he too, dropped down on his knees and began to beat his breast

saying, "I'm nobody. I'm nobody." The beadle (custodian) saw the Rabbi and the Cantor, so he also got down on his knees and began to beat his breast saying, "I'm nobody. I'm nobody." The Cantor nudged the Rabbi, pointed to the beadle and said, "Look who thinks he's nobody."

False humility, or humility acted out under false pretenses, can be even more annoying than arrogance. This is one of the things that Jesus found so bothersome about the Pharisees. They went around pretending to be humble but in reality they were not. They only pretended to be humble in order to attract the attention and admiration of others.

The second thing we need to keep in mind is that being humble doesn't mean we have to adopt a negative self-image. In fact, just the opposite is true. Staying humble should help us feel better about ourselves. Being humble doesn't mean we have to put ourselves down. It means we have to lift others up. Being humble is simply the acknowledgement that nobody is perfect and that whatever meager gifts or abilities we may have come from God and not from us.

When Thomas Hardy was so famous that any newspaper would have gladly paid an enormous sum for his work, he used to occasionally submit a poem to the local newspaper. Each time however, he would always be sure to enclose a self-addressed stamped envelope in case his manuscript should be rejected. Even in his greatness he was humble enough to think that his work might be turned down.

In his commentary on Luke (*The Daily Study Bible Series*) William Barclay points out that there are two ways by which we can retain our humility. The first is by realizing the facts. However much we know we know very little compared with the sum total of knowledge. However much we have achieved we have achieved very little in the end. However important we may believe ourselves to be, when our lives are over, or we retire from our jobs, the world will go on just the same without us.

The second way to retain our humility according to Barclay, is by comparison to the perfect. It is only when we go and see or hear an expert that

we realize how limited our own ability is. Many a person has decided to junk their clubs after watching Tiger Woods at the U.S. Open. Many a person has decided never to play in public again after hearing a master musician perform. It would be a mistake to allow the perfect to become the enemy of the good, yet at the same time we need the perfect to remind us that we may not be quite as good as we think we are.

In the realm of the spiritual life the closest thing we have to perfection is Jesus. If not the Son of God, then he was at least the highest incarnation of humanity the world has ever known. Only by comparing ourselves to him do we realize how far we still have to travel on our own spiritual journeys. This is the point of Jesus' often misunderstood statement in the Sermon on the Mount, "You must be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matthew 5:48). Of course none of us is perfect but that's precisely why we need Jesus. We need him as our model and our goal. We need him to keep us humble.

I entitled today's sermon, "The Sacrament of Humility." Strictly speaking, humility may not be a sacrament, but it should certainly be a practice. It clearly worked for Jesus and it will work for us too—provided of course, that we can humble ourselves enough to try it.

Let us pray:

O God, grant us the gift of humility we pray, in order that we may continue to grow each day more and more into the likeness of the One who is our wisdom and our strength. Amen.

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