

HUMILITY

Luke 14:1, 7-14

Luke tells us that as Jesus ate a Sabbath meal at the home of a prominent Pharisee that they were watching him closely. But it is evident that Jesus was watching them even more closely. He observed his host and the guests vying with one another for social status and place. So Jesus taught them a lesson about humility. Jesus suggested that instead of each seeking the highest place for themselves they might do better to seek the lowest.

There are many wonderful sayings about *humility* – General Chesty Poller of the Marines gave us the famous line, *“it’s hard to be humble when you’re the best!”* Rick Warren, author of *The Purpose Driven Life*, says *“humility is not thinking less of yourself, it’s thinking of yourself less.”* The poet, T.S. Elliott, suggested that *“humility is the most difficult of all virtues to achieve; nothing dies harder than the desire to think well of oneself.”* Comedian Phyllis Diller proves the poet’s point in her humorous observation: *“You know what keeps me humble? Mirrors!”* The opposite of humility is pride. Many have noted that pride can easily disguise itself as humility. The poet William Cowper notes the difference: *“Knowledge is proud that he has learned so much. Wisdom is humble that he knows no more.”* 17th century British divine Benjamin Whichcote made the wry observation that *“none are so empty as those who are full of themselves.”* Pride is love of what is essentially false: to love of appearance, of pretence, status, place, the inflation of the ego. The humble focus on what is really important: love, service, honesty, knowledge, building relationships, the well being of another, joy, beauty, and the like. French enlightenment philosopher Charles de Montesquieu put it well when he wrote, *“to become truly great, one has to stand with people, not above them.”*

One more quotation –Archibald Alexander a Presbyterian theologian and first principal of Princeton University, wrote, *“Humility is to the Christian what ballast is to the ship; it keeps one in one’s proper position and regulates all one’s thoughts and feelings.”* *“Humility is to the Christian what ballast is to the ship;”* it helps us not sway and pitch so much from wave to wave, and to keep a steady course.

Sometimes we think of humility in negative terms, as pretending to think badly of yourself or putting yourself down. Humility does not mean being passive. It is not about weakness, not about being a victim, not about letting yourself be abused and run over, not about being wimpy.

Being humble is not about having a weak ego. There are two types of people who have weak egos. On the one hand are people who don’t think they’re very good. They feel unlovable and so often they are. They don’t think they’re competent and so they’re not. They don’t believe in themselves and consequently no one else believes in them either. That’s the type of person with a weak ego we sometimes call *humble*.

More often people with a weak ego practice the policy that a good offense is the best defense. They try to prove their worth through power or prestige or popularity. They may seek the spotlight and praise. They may have a chip on their shoulder and be easily offended.

To be truly humble means having a strong ego. The humble don't have to put themselves down or try to prove themselves. They don't feel threatened if someone else is doing well. They don't need to prove their own worth. Christian humility comes from the strength of knowing our great worth in Christ's love. The humble have a source of strength beyond themselves. The truly humble are released from the preoccupation with self that steals so much of our time, energy and creativity.

Jesus' most famous quotation about humility is in today's gospel – *“all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”* It would be wiser he said to take a lower seat and let the host at the feast raise you up higher than to vie and fight with one another over who gets the best seat at the banquet.

What place do we claim at God's feast, God's banquet? *“I went to church every Sunday and I was very religious.”* ***I'm sorry but you'll have to take a lower seat.*** *“I was an ordained priest and led a large congregation. See how much I did for your church?!”* ***I'm sorry but you'll have to take a lower seat too.*** *“I was a great scholar.”* *“I did all kinds of charity work.”* *“I served on the Altar Guild.”* *“I was on the Vestry.”* ***I'm sorry but you'll have to take a lower seat!*** *“I am a sinner in need of your mercy. Forgive me and help me change.”* ***Please come up higher!*** What claim do we even have to be at God's table but God's invitation? We don't belong at God's table. We can never *earn* a place. Our only claim to be here is God's mercy, God's forgiveness, God's love, the free gift of new life in Jesus Christ. Always remember that our place at God's table is a free gift of love. We don't have to jockey for position at God's table!

Remember also that God came down and joined us at the feast of life on this earth. Not always the best feast. Sometimes the fare at the feast of life on earth is pretty good, sometimes, so so, sometimes pretty awful. But God shared that table of life with us. He didn't take the best seat, certainly not the place of Lord and King. No. Our Lord chose to be born among us in a stable in Bethlehem, a poor child of poor parents. In Jesus God made his place with us. He took our part. He shared our humanity, our brokenness; he took our sins upon himself. He took the cross and died for us. In this life Jesus made it a special point to identify with the poor and outcast. He ate with tax collector and sinners. He welcomed those who were shunned by the Pharisees. When our Lord shared with us in the feast of life on this earth he took the lowest seat of a servant that we might go up higher.

Today's parable indicates God's strategy at the table of life; it reveals God's dynamism. It tells us how God goes to the poor and the wretched and the lowly placed ones; it tells how God moves them up. That is God's movement: to be a servant, to lift up the lowly and place them higher.

God's dynamism in this world should be our movement too. At the table of life we share with others in this world, we are called to be servants, to make our place with the poor, the dispossessed, the outcast, with those in need. We are called to serve others as Christ served us.

And each and every one of us has the power and the resources to make a sizable difference in somebody's life. Adopting the cost of child's education in our companion mission of *Good Samaritan School* in L'Acul, Haiti could mean the difference between

an uneducated child caught in the cycle of poverty and an educated child having real opportunities. Sponsoring a flock of chickens or a goat or bee hive or a heifer through *Heifer International* could provide the means of livelihood for a poor villager in many 3rd world countries. Researching and assisting charities that provide micro-loans for poor people to start their own businesses. Closer to home volunteering as a tutor at St. Luke's Lifeworks. Assisting in the building of home through *Habitat for Humanity*. Giving to your favorite charities, locally and abroad that have shown a proven track record of making a positive difference in peoples' lives. There's so very much we can do if we give it some imagination and energy and time and money. We can be part of God's dynamism.

Sharing in the dynamism of Christ's servanthood is no less important right where we are. Being a servant to one another in Christian community, right here. Caring for one another, supporting, reaching out in love. Doing the jobs of a servant in community; Being a servant to our families, our friends, in our work, in our school. Anywhere and everywhere we can share in Christ's dynamism of servanthood is where we should take the lower seat.

It's hard to be humble, not because we're so good, but because being humble means dying with Christ. It means letting ourselves go and letting God live within us, through us. It means taking ourselves a whole lot less seriously. It means accepting Christ's verdict as we stand before his judgement seat: "*forgiven,*" "*loved,*" "*made whole,*" "*chosen,*" "*sent,*" in the name Christ. Amen.