

August 28, 2016

Hebrews 13: 1-8,15-16 ; Luke 14: 1,7-14

Humble

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Hebrews 13:1-8,15-16

Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it. Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them; those who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured. Let marriage be held in honour by all, and let the marriage bed be kept undefiled; for God will judge fornicators and adulterers. Keep your lives free from the love of money, and be content with what you have; for he has said, 'I will never leave you or forsake you.' So we can say with confidence, 'The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can anyone do to me?' Remember your leaders, those who spoke the word of God to you; consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and for ever. Through him, then, let us continually offer a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that confess his name. Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.

Luke 14:1, 7-14

On one occasion when Jesus was going to the house of a leader of the Pharisees to eat a meal on the sabbath, they were watching him closely. When Jesus noticed how the guests chose the places of honor, he told them a parable. "When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not sit down at the place of honor, in case someone more distinguished than you has been invited by your host; and the host who invited both of you may come and say to you, 'Give this person your place,' and then in disgrace you would start to take the lowest place. But when you are invited, go and sit down at 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." He said also to the one who had invited him, "When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous."

Humble

Sing: Live a-humble, humble, humble, yourselves, the bells done ring

I knew I had heard that African-American spiritual somewhere in my life but when I went to look for it on Google or YouTube to remind myself of the words and the tune, I had a darn hard time finding it. That made me wonder what it is about the days in which we live and why this song should be so scarce online. I have two guesses: First is the fact that humility is not exactly a popular topic or a much appreciated virtue in this day and age. Secondly, this is one of the spirituals that seems to have drifted out of the canon, perhaps because its especially politically incorrect to remember songs that emerged out of slavery in apparent support of the people's unpaid labor and subjugated position. I'm sure that most of us are horrified by lyrics that seem to put down a people who were already oppressed. Nowadays we are rightfully ashamed of the huge difference in power and status which the institution of slavery imposed.

But here's another perspective on that idea, a story I found about Booker T.

Washington, who was a great African-American scientist and professor in the 19th century at the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama. One day when Dr. Washington was walking to work, he passed by the mansion of a wealthy white woman. The woman, product of her southern culture, called out to him, as he appeared to be just another black man on the streets. "Hey you! Come here! I need some wood chopped!" Without a mumbling word, the good professor took off his jacket, grabbed the ax and went to work.

Cutting a large pile of wood, he carried it into the house and stacked it neatly by the fireplace. After he left, the woman's servant said to her: "Ma'am, that was Professor Washington from the college!" Embarrassed and ashamed, the woman went to his office directly to apologize. And the story that Dr Washington said to her: "There's no need to apologize, madam. I'm delighted to do favors for my friends." His lesson that day was about the power of a meek and humble spirit in a world where aggressiveness and arrogance often passes for strength.

In today's world, probably no one would respond to such a demanding old lady, neither black nor white, unless there were an offer of payment. Yet there are still folk of such humble heart that they respond whenever they see a need, regardless of perception of status.

My father was a huge influence in my life. One of his greatest aspirations was to be a truly humble person. He grew up on a farm in western Pennsylvania with many chores to do as the only son. Because of his intellect, he was able to graduate from Allegheny and then from Harvard Law School in the midst of the Depression. He married my mother in her hometown, a shoe-manufacturer village south of Boston. Dad joined a prosperous law firm, and began to make his way into the upper middle class. Yet he never grasped for power or status. He would never say he was "proud" of us, his children, instead he would confess active satisfaction in us. Pride was a kind of bragging in which he would not indulge.

In my first year of high school, newly enrolled in Latin (my father knew French, German, Latin AND Greek) I recall Dad's explanation of the word humble and related word, humility. It derives from humus, the ground itself, the rich composting substance with which we nourish our gardens. Humble people are those who live close to the dirt, and are usually looked down upon by others with the privilege of living in better circumstances. Yet Dad reminded me that God had made the first human beings out of the "humus" of the earth and thus all humans are made of the same creative soil favored by God. Truly humble people are close to the ground, "grounded", not necessarily famous or powerful, but close to God.

Most adolescents in our modern world struggle to find their identity in those years, striving to be famous or wealthy or powerful, or all three. What else can we expect, with the kind of celebrity worship and overconsumption brought to us by modern media? Most of us as parents are willing to say we are "proud" of our children's achievements – even me – but more important for me is that they are good, caring, and yes, humble people.

CS Lewis in Mere Christianity says “The essential vice, the utmost evil, is Pride. Pride leads to every other vice: it is the complete anti-God state of mind. What you want to get clear is that Pride is essentially competitive – is competitive by its very nature...Pride gets no pleasure out of having something, only out of having more of it than the next (man). Pride always means enmity... In God you come up against something that is in every respect immeasurably superior to yourself. Unless you know God as that – and, therefore, know yourself as nothing in comparison – you do not know God at all.”

What does today's gospel teach us of humility? In this parable which Jesus tells to the Pharisees, those who have just criticized him for healing on the Sabbath, he talks indirectly about their prideful sense of moral correctness in the law. They inflated their own importance as moral gatekeepers and therefore would seat themselves at places of honor at the table.

“Get down off your high horse,” Jesus might have said to them in English, “and learn that what God wants is an inclusive table, one that includes all the people of the land, all the humble people, of every economic and social and health status. It's particularly important to invite the blind and the poor and the lame.” The phrase which Jesus quotes is actually taken from Proverbs 25: “For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted.”

In the letter to the Hebrews we read, a deep connection is made between that OT value of hospitality and humility. We are to offer our humble service to anyone and everyone in need, whether it be an invitation to dinner, an overnight lodging, chopping firewood, or even foot-washing, the most menial of a servant tasks, which Jesus himself did for his disciples on the last night of his life. There is no task that is too low for us to offer on behalf of a person in need, for in so doing we may find that we have served angels unaware.

In Jesus' time, the extra invited guests were the poor, the blind, and the lame, as well as the lepers and the prostitutes and the tax collectors: all those to whom the "good" Pharisees would not pay attention, since it was assumed they were suffering for some deserved reason, some kind of violation of the law.

It is difficult for us to consider who those extra guests might be in our time: surely, we do our best to care for the homeless, the poor, the abused women, the neglected children, all those categories of people who can get some help through our state services and those like the JUMP program.

But what about those folks who don't fit neatly into one of our "deserving" poor? What about those who are offered help but instead choose to drink, or take opiates, or refuse to take medication if mentally ill? How would Jesus have us serve such people? As an urban church, this is not an easy question.

In closing I will share one more rather silly story about myself. During my decade of estrangement from the church, roughly from age 16-26, I experimented with bits and pieces of other spiritual paths, such as Zen Buddhism and Tai Chi and even astrology. As part of that exploration, I had someone complete a full version of my natal star chart, with astrological interpretation. Actually, the narrative was eerily correct about some parts of my personality and strengths and weaknesses, as I recall.

But what I remember most about it was something very strange. The astrologer said that in my past life I had been a "mean queen." There was not much definition of that term, but I was very offended to think that someone might think I had been imperious and demanding in any way. That was not how I saw myself. What it implied, however, was that in this life, I could achieve a kind of karmic balance by being in the position of serving everyone, that that was my destiny for this lifetime. That's not exactly what your average 25 year old wants to hear...

But in fact it has been one of the major themes of my life, serving others as a pastor, serving as a mother and grandmother, serving as a seeker of justice for refugees and disaster flood victims and mentally ill folk. Over the years I have learned to humbly –

and gratefully- take up the tasks which have been set before me and to understand them as part of my spiritual journey.

It was also part of my father's journey. He had been the caregiver for my mother who had mild dementia, and a few days before his sudden death, he stayed up late making a Valentine's Day card on the computer for his beloved wife of 59 years. In it he quoted St. Francis' prayer: "Grant not so much that I may be loved as that I should love." At his memorial service, many spoke of his humble and generous nature and the simple deeds he had done on their behalf.

In the concluding words from the Hebrews' passage, I exhort you:

"Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God."

Words of Assurance

This is the good news: after what God has done for us, what can anyone do to us? We are new people, graced , forgiven, and embraced by our loving God. Let us offer our open hearts and serving hands to everyone we meet. Thanks be to God.

Benediction

Jesus has told us who needs us to care: the poor, the blind, the lame, and anyone else whose need confronts us. Keep your eyes open and your hands willing to see Christ in others.

Remember you are God's beloved. The Holy Spirit lives in you and Christ's compassion shines forth in what you do. Go in peace, to love and serve God.

Yertle the Turtle by Dr. Seuss

On the far-away island of Sala-ma-Sond,
Yertle the Turtle was king of the pond.
A nice little pond. It was clean. It was neat.
The water was warm. There was plenty to eat.
The turtles had everything turtles might need.
And they were all happy. Quite happy indeed.

They were... untill Yertle, the king of them all,
Decided the kingdom he ruled was too small.
"I'm ruler", said Yertle, "of all that I see.
But I don't see enough. That's the trouble with me.
With this stone for a throne, I look down on my pond
But I cannot look down on the places beyond.
This throne that I sit on is too, too low down.
It ought to be higher!" he said with a frown.
"If I could sit high, how much greater I'd be!

What a king! I'd be ruler of all that I see!"

So Yertle, the Turtle King, lifted his hand
And Yertle, the Turtle King, gave a command.
He ordered nine turtles to swim to his stone
And, using these turtles, he built a new throne.
He made each turtle stand on another one's back
And he piled them all up in a nine-turtle stack.
And then Yertle climbed up. He sat down on the pile.
What a wonderful view! He could see 'most a mile!

"All mine!" Yertle cried. "Oh, the things I now rule!
I'm the king of a cow! And I'm the king of a mule!
I'm the king of a house! And, what's more, beyond that
I'm the king of a blueberry bush and a cat!
I'm Yertle the Turtle! Oh, marvelous me!
For I am the ruler of all that I see!"

And all through the morning, he sat up there high
Saying over and over, "A great king am I!"
Until 'long about noon. Then he heard a faint sigh.
"What's that?" snapped the king
And he looked down the stack.
And he saw, at the bottom, a turtle named Mack.
Just a part of his throne. And this plain little turtle
Looked up and he said, "Beg your pardon, King Yertle.
I've pains in my back and my shoulders and knees.
How long must we stand here, Your Majesty, please?"

"SILENCE!" the King of the Turtles barked back.
"I'm king, and you're only a turtle named Mack."
"You stay in your place while I sit here and rule.
I'm the king of a cow! And I'm the king of a mule!
I'm the king of a house! And a bush! And a cat!
But that isn't all. I'll do better than that!
My throne shall be higher!" his royal voice thundered,
"So pile up more turtles! I want 'bout two hundred!"

"Turtles! More turtles!" he bellowed and brayed.
And the turtles 'way down in the pond were afraid.
They trembled. They shook. But they came. They obeyed.
>From all over the pond, they came swimming by dozens.
Whole families of turtles, with uncles and cousins.
And all of them stepped on the head of poor Mack.

One after another, they climbed up the stack.
Then Yertle the Turtle was perched up so high,
He could see forty miles from his throne in the sky!
"Hooray!" shouted Yertle. "I'm the king of the trees!
I'm king of the birds! And I'm king of the bees!
I'm king of the butterflies! King of the air!
Ah, me! What a throne! What a wonderful chair!
I'm Yertle the Turtle! Oh, marvelous me!
For I am the ruler of all that I see!"

Then again, from below, in the great heavy stack,
Came a groan from that plain little turtle named Mack.
"Your Majesty, please... I don't like to complain,
But down here below, we are feeling great pain.
I know, up on top you are seeing great sights,
But down here at the bottom we, too, should have rights.
We turtles can't stand it. Our shells will all crack!
Besides, we need food. We are starving!" groaned Mack.

"You hush up your mouth!" howled the mighty King Yertle.
"You've no right to talk to the world's highest turtle.
I rule from the clouds! Over land! Over sea!
There's nothing, no, NOTHING, that's higher than me!"

But, while he was shouting, he saw with surprise
That the moon of the evening was starting to rise
Up over his head in the darkening skies.
"What's THAT?" snorted Yertle. "Say, what IS that thing
That dares to be higher than Yertle the King?
I shall not allow it! I'll go higher still!
I'll build my throne higher! I can and I will!
I'll call some more turtles. I'll stack 'em to heaven!
I need 'bout five thousand, six hundred and seven!"

But, as Yertle, the Turtle King, lifted his hand
And started to order and give the command,
That plain little turtle below in the stack,
That plain little turtle whose name was just Mack,
Decided he'd taken enough. And he had.
And that plain little lad got a bit mad.
And that plain little Mack did a plain little thing.
He burped!
And his burp shook the throne of the king!

And Yertle the Turtle, the king of the trees,
The king of the air and the birds and the bees,
The king of a house and a cow and a mule...
Well, that was the end of the Turtle King's rule!
For Yertle, the King of all Sala-ma-Sond,
Fell off his high throne and fell Plunk! in the pond!

And tosay the great Yertle, that Marvelous he,
Is King of the Mud. That is all he can see.
And the turtles, of course... all the turtles are free
As turtles and, maybe, all creatures should be.