

“Humble Pie”
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Trinity United Church, 3 July 2016

Good Morning, on this long holiday weekend in both Canada and the US. And a gracious thank-you to Foster who provided this opportunity for me to preach, as part of his 10-week series of sermons on Jesus’ parables in the Gospel of Luke. I’m delighted to be here this Sunday. Now . . .

As an aside, but not quite: in my NRSV of the Bible, the heading for vss. 7-14 of this Lukan passage is “Humility and Hospitality,” so I’ll zero in on those topics today.

The setting for today’s passage is the home of a leading Pharisee who’s hosting a dinner party. And, as we know from the 5 vss. *not* read, the guests are other Pharisees and lawyers – representatives of two relevant professions in that time period: well-educated, these are men who know the law, be it religious or civil: the law is their *métier*, and they hold the power to administer it . . . every jot ‘n tittle.

They may well have a reason for inviting Jesus, an *agenda* that permits them to “watch him closely” to see what he does in their company. Jesus *has* acquired a reputation as both teacher and healer, so perhaps they find him rather fascinating . . . or threatening. So why not put a person in Jesus’ immediate presence who’s ill? A man who would never be invited otherwise, someone who strikes me as a plant, a pawn so Jesus may be put to the test.

So here they are, watching Jesus closely; but he’s just as attentive. The healing done, Jesus “notices” how they’re choosing seats at the table, vying for places of honour, as if they’re in a game of musical chairs, chairs that permit them to be *seen* as important, because if they’re sitting near the more or most important guests, people will assume they’re equally important. It mattered in those days to be honoured *publically*. So it’s a perception thing: appearance *vs.* reality! But has it been any different since, or is it any different today?

You know as well as I, that to be able to have the choice or best seats at an event matters: not only does one have a better view and hear better; but one’s reputation, one’s sense of importance, is validated by proximity. In many jobs ‘n professions, a person starts out at the lowest rank and works his/her way up; so any opportunity, social or otherwise, to be seen with the senior people could pay off. So all this jockeying for seats at the Lukan dinner party has an agenda, a competitive business one.

So what does Jesus do when he “notices” their actions? He could have quoted some lines from Proverbs 25:

In the presence of the king, do not give yourself airs, do not put yourself where the great are standing; better to be invited, “Come up here,” than to be humiliated in the presence of the prince. (Proverbs 25:6-7)

Or he could just tell them directly they’re out of line; he doesn’t – mostly because their activity isn’t out of line. In that society, it was the norm. What does he do instead? I’m reminded of a comment by poet Emily Dickinson: “Tell the truth, but tell it slant.” Jesus tells a story, a parable of a wedding banquet where the guests typically are seated according to degree of importance, based on relationship. What I find fascinating in this is the language Jesus uses: words, especially adjectives, the Pharisees and lawyers can understand. His advice? When they’re at a wedding, they should take the “lowest” not the “best” seats, and the host may tell them to “come up higher.” His words echo the ranking system they live, the ladders they need to climb, in their professional strata of society. He’s not saying take the “farthest” seat where you then might be invited to “come closer.” To be told to “come closer” implies a degree of personal *relationship*, not association by profession or competition. Plus, he’s speaking of humility, rarely

considered a virtue in the society of the day. Jesus is firm but gracious in his suggestion; he's handing them a bit of humble pie, but on a nice plate! Anyone's guess if they eat it! But it brings us to the topic of humility, as we recall the well-known vs. from today's Gospel: "those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."(vs.11) Ah, shades of a line from Sirach 3:18: "Humble yourself so you will find favour in the sight of the Lord." A line the Pharisees should know as well as the one from Proverbs.

Humility: it reminds me of a column in the daily morning paper we got when I was growing up. Every day it mentioned a new word, used it in various sentences, and encouraged readers to "use it three times and make it your own." Consider one word that spins out of today's Gospel, and I'm not so sure people will be jumping at this opportunity. Nor am I certain that just using this word three times will make it our own in terms of living it. What's the word? **Humble**. Be it used as adjective or verb, its appeal seems minimal. Its kindred word **Humility** often has the same effect on people. Humility: Christians label this a virtue because it's a mark of being a Christian.

But the root and meanings of these words matter. The Latin origin of humble and humility comes from the same root, **humus**, which relates to the earth. It's that wonderful rich soil that actually comes from things that have decomposed. And in one place, the dictionary notes that low-growing plants thrive in humus! So, to be humble? My sense is that a humble person is well-grounded, down-to-earth, the salt of the earth – basically lacking in pretensions. Truly humble people don't distance themselves from others, don't put on airs, and don't put others down; they're not haughty, disdainful, arrogant, or pushy. Humility is a quality possessed by a person who holds a modest 'n honest opinion of him or herself; it implies that an individual has an honourable, balanced sense of his/her own worth, and of his or her place in the universe. Humble people respect and honour the worth of others.

Why do these words lack appeal? Well, over time, the virtue of humility, or the intention to be a humble person has suffered bad press. Often it's equated with being a dormouse, or doormat. It implies a degree of meekness, piety, and passivity that many judge to be quite unacceptable. "How can you get ahead this way, or make it in this world?" Then, to flip a coin, we also know there *are* Uriah Heeps in our world, and because of their sham, their insincerity, humility really gets a bad name.

To compound this dilemma, enter another word: **humiliation**, a relative in the same earthy family. It issues from my sense that I've "been humbled." That I've been shamed, have been "taken down a peg or two," worse if that's in public. Truly embarrassing. Further, people in positions of authority can abuse their power over others, thoughtlessly or intentionally, causing cruel humiliation to the recipient. But *anyone* who needs to feel "better than" another can demean/debase the other, and it's worse when this is done publically; and it often is, given how common one-upsmanship and self-aggrandizement are these days. Finally, humility is problematic when it's clear that most cultures place value on one's rank in society. The determinants may vary, but people get measured by external markers; when it's the markers that become valuable, then the people get prized or devalued accordingly.

To ignore the merit/worth of humility is to ignore Jesus' lesson in this passage, the same lesson we often receive in other parables featuring a meal where everything one expects gets turned upside down. The accepted pattern of how a thing is done is reversed. This Gospel passage and others present an overturning of most of the values and measures of success, the attainment of which society validates. Upsetting the norm this way leaves the self-righteous humbled and those of lesser rank honoured instead.

At which point Jesus segues nicely into an instruction specifically meant for the host. Plainly: how to be hospitable and to whom. Don't invite people who can reciprocate, this in a society where reciprocity was critical in a patronage system. Instead, invite people who have no chance to return the favour, who are incapable of repaying you in kind. Overlook your family 'n friends, and bring in the lame, blind, and halt. Ah, are you reminded as I am of the man with

dropsy, who was only brought in to the dinner strictly as a pawn? Jesus says to the host, you may not be seen or acknowledged publically for doing the right thing; do it anyway and your reward will come later, “at the resurrection of the righteous.” He’s suggesting a new kind of hospitality, one that ignores the culturally accepted caste system and includes all those who would otherwise never be considered fit company. Morph to today, even with our language of democracy and equality, and we know this is still the case when we consider how the homeless, the poor, the infirm, and the refugee are received/treated.

The hospitality of which Jesus speaks is about relationship. However one applies the terms, it’s about exchange between guest and host. It’s not an exchange of money or services, and frankly it’s not meant to be equitable. It’s about giving and receiving by both parties: the guest receives a genuine welcome, and the host receives the guest AS IS. And it can never be forced or imposed it must be freely given. Hospitality is about recognizing who the other is, recognizing the presence of the Creator in that individual and being open to and accepting of whatever the person has to offer. This is the hospitality Jesus lived and taught so his followers, then ‘n now, would follow suit. It’s a counter-cultural endeavour which works only when one is open to change. And lest we forget, the Christian life is a call to change. Hospitality and humility are about relationship and community, the company we keep and how we do that.

This banquet story and the one that follows – in vss. 15-24 – remind us of the festal gathering in the heavenly Jerusalem, the eternal banquet of the Lamb to which God invites each of us, and where God as host throws out all our preconceived notions of who should be there and where they sit. This banquet is one of inclusivity and amazing openness: trusting we’re there, we could end up sitting next to the most unlikely people. Can we accept this? If not yet, then are we ready to try *practicing* now?

Now, as a final note: last week, Foster said, “Since you’re a Benedictine, I hope you’ll make some reference to what Benedict might say on these topics.” Indeed in his Rule – which is more a guide to sensible living than a set of regulations – 4th century St. Benedict has a *central* and long chapter on Humility. One thing he mentions is the ladder where, in his dream, Jacob sees angels ascending and descending (Gen. 28:12). Benedict notes that our life is a ladder, and we “descend by exaltation and ascend by humility.” That “if we humble our hearts, God will raise our ladder to heaven.” Benedict sees humility as the foundational glue of community.

And Hospitality? It’s a core value in a lived Benedictine spirituality. I’ll end with the few words from the Rule that, for me, say it all because – be we Benedictine or not – we can apply them to so many situations today, and that’s our challenge. So, to quote: “There will always be guests at the door, and each is to be received as Christ.”
May it be so.

