

“We, with humble hearts...”

September 1, 2019

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Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of our hearts, be acceptable to you, O Lord. Amen.

When I was a junior officer, working in the Navy’s headquarters in Halifax, I was assigned to help with many special events. Of these, the biggest was the annual visit of VIPs to the Royal Nova Scotia International Tattoo. The very best six rows of seats in the arena were reserved for the military’s special guests, and the list of nightly guests of honour attending ranged from the heads of allied armed forces or the Commissioner of the RCMP, to the Governor General or even a member of the royal family.

A very great deal of time was spent developing the seating plans for these special evenings of entertainment, but no matter how hard we tried, there was, each year, at least one guest who felt that they hadn’t been offered a sufficiently prestigious place in the stands, and would try to re-seat themselves closer to that evening’s guest of honour.

On these occasions it was my job, as aide-de-camp, to approach our wayward guest and gently but firmly direct them to their previously assigned seat. My cheeks always flushed with embarrassment for both myself and the guest when this happened, but I can only imagine how embarrassed our wayward guests were, with 5,000 pairs of eyes riveted on their predicament from around the bowl of the arena, as they were very publicly placed in a less desirable spot than the one they had tried to claim.

It is this kind of scene that Jesus sees unfolding around him in the lesson today from Luke 14. Worship in the synagogue has ended, and he has been invited to a Pharisee’s house for dinner. As the time for the meal approaches, all of the guests jockey to get the best and most honoured places for the impending feast. Status was at stake, and in the middle-class world inhabited by the Pharisees and their guests, status was very important.

Jesus sees in this unseemly spectacle, a teaching moment, and offers a lesson in *humility*. He says to the assembled guests: “When ... invited to a ...banquet, do not sit down in the place of honour, in case someone more distinguished than you has been invited by the host; and the host ... may say to you, ‘Give this person your place’; and then in disgrace you would have to take the lowest place. So when you are invited, take the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he will say to you, ‘Friend, move up to a better place.’ Then you will be honoured in the presence of all of your fellow guests.” A lesson in humility, and in the way that honour can come to those who choose the lowest place.

Now, humility is not one of the Christian virtues that we hear a lot about any more. In this age of one-upmanship and oversized egos in public life; with all of the foibles of the “me”

generation on clear display around us, it can be hard to find outstanding examples of humility.

But humility is *so* important. When asked what were the three most important Christian virtues? Saint Augustine replied, “Humility, humility, and humility.”

Humility is accepting the fact that we are all fallen sinners, and that our salvation only comes, through grace, from Christ Jesus. Humility is knowing that each good thing that we have in life, comes from God, and not from our own independent exercise of gifts and talents.

Now, Jesus, is all about humility. He demonstrates this through his actions. He humbled himself enough to take on mortal flesh, and be born in a stable. Jesus took on the life of a wandering preacher, with no home, nor wealth, nor even visible means of sustenance. He was a servant King, healing the lame and the blind and the possessed, comforting widows, and showing the oppressed and outcast true friendship. And Jesus took humility to the extremes of human experience during the trials and tribulations of Maundy Thursday and Good Friday.

Jesus not only showed humility through his actions, Jesus *taught* humility. How many times did he preach: the greatest among you will be the least, and the least among you, the greatest. In Luke 9, an argument started among the apostles regarding who would be the greatest. “Jesus, knowing their thoughts, sat down among them and said, ‘Anyone who wants to be first must be the very last, and the servant of all.’” I *repeat*, “must be the very last, and the servant of all.” Thus, Christ links a posture of humility and a vocation of service.

But this was not what the apostles wanted to hear. If we were honest with ourselves, perhaps it is not what we always want to hear. No matter how long they had been with Jesus, the apostles were still secretly hoping that Christ would be a conquering King, a king of worldly power and might, a king who rewarded his followers with high office and money and fame. The apostles’ families thought the same thing. So we see in Matthew 20, the mother of Zebedee’s sons, James and John, ask Christ if her sons could be granted to sit as his left and right hand when he comes into his Kingdom. And Jesus replies: “You don’t know what you are asking...Can you drink the cup I am going to drink?” He means, of course, the humiliation and suffering of Passion Week. The positions of honour in Christ’s Kingdom are reserved for the ones who have suffered the most, and sacrificed the most, for our Lord.

Yet even on the night of the Last Supper, the apostles hadn’t really taken in this lesson. They were together in the upper room, sharing their last meal together. It had been a busy

day walking the streets of Jerusalem and they were probably hot and sweaty. Jesus' heart would have been heavy, knowing the ordeal that would soon begin. In a corner of the room, their host had thoughtfully left out a pitcher full of water, a basin and a large towel, so that his guests could wash their feet, as was the custom. But not one of the disciples offered to perform this menial task for his fellows. They, as was their wont, were arguing among themselves about who would be the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven. Had we been there with the apostles, would we have acted any differently, do you think?

What did *Jesus* think in that moment? The time had grown short – very short. He was surrounded by his closest confidants, the ones who he had taught and led and preached with: the ones who had seen his ministry to the weak and dispossessed and lonely. And still, even at this hour, they did not understand the central role of humility in his teaching.

Jesus decided that an object lesson was in order. Another teaching about humility, like the one he offered at the banquet in the Pharisee's house, was insufficient to the moment. So he rose, shrugged off his mantle, and wrapped the provided towel around his waist. Then he poured water into the basin and beckoned his followers to come and have their feet washed. He, the Son of God, was making himself his followers' servant. He was adopting the most humble position in that vignette, the washer of feet.

When it was Peter's turn to be washed, he rebelled. "Lord, do you wash my feet?" he exclaimed. Jesus answered him, "What I am doing you do not understand now, but afterward you will understand." Then Peter said to him, "You shall never wash my feet." And Jesus replied, "If I do not wash you, you have no share with me." And finally, Peter got it. So he said to his Master, "Lord, wash not only my feet but my hands and my head also!"

What Peter finally understood is that humility before God is the cardinal Christian virtue. From it flow all the other virtues: contentment, generosity, diligence, thankfulness, self-control and even love. Saint Augustine had it right. The most important Christian virtue is humility.

Let me be clear. This is not the humility of abasing oneself, and not the humility of abject self-denial. This humility is grounded in the knowledge that we are each called a *beloved child of God*. We can neither seek nor find a more worthy title than this in heaven and earth. And this is the humility that comes from knowing that we have been offered the greatest boon in all Creation – *eternal life in the presence of Christ, our God*, not through works but through faith and grace. When we are humble, we are grounded in the knowledge that no greater reward can be sought nor found. And if we hold the *greatest title* to be had, and possess, through grace, the *greatest gift* that can be had, then striving for worldly titles and power become futile pursuits.

If we know these two things, then we can each adopt a truly humble demeanour, focusing not on *our* wants, but serving others with glad hearts, knowing that our reward is great in Heaven, and that service to others is the greatest human calling of all.

The great inspirational leader from India, Mahatma Gandhi, knew this. A story is told of Gandhi and his travels. One day as he stepped aboard a train, one of his shoes slipped off and landed on the track below. The train was already gathering steam and would soon be racing down the rails. Not able to retrieve his lost shoe, Gandhi quickly removed the one he was still wearing and threw it onto the track beside its mate. When a fellow passenger asked why he had done this, Gandhi replied: “The poor man who finds the shoe lying on the track, will now have a pair that he can actually use. One shoe would have been useless to him.” You see, Gandhi wasn’t thinking about the disappointment of his own loss. He had immediately pivoted to thinking about the gain of the lowly man who might come across the fallen shoe. This focus on the other, is a sign of true humility and the mark of a servant heart.

We all have a service to offer, if we are humble enough to truly assess our God-given gifts. We cannot serve everyone, but we can serve somebody. And if *everybody* is serving *somebody*, then it follows that everyone will be served. And that sounds to me like the prescription for a pretty wonderful world.

May we strive to live out this lesson in our lives today.

Amen.