

SERMONS FROM ST. FRANCIS

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By the time we get to this part of Luke's gospel, the religious leaders at least knew of Jesus. On this particular evening, Jesus is invited to a dinner party. He is the guest of honor, who was probably invited both because the religious leaders were curious about him and also to watch him closely. I am sure Jesus was aware of being watched, but he still did what he felt he needed to do. In his usual fashion, he did not get involved in the political maneuvering of the guests who were trying to get the best seats near the head of the table and the guest of honor. Jesus did not worry about what others would think. He acted by turning their social conventions against them, making the dinner party into a tense situation where guests and hosts are criticized, probably making them think it was a mistake to invite him. Jesus not only insults all those present, he points them and us towards a different way of life.

As we read into the text, the topics of pride and humility stare at you from the page, begging to be discussed. And so you will not think I am trying to avoid the subject, I will make some brief comments. Benjamin Franklin told about humility in his autobiography. He designed a program for self-improvement. He created a table of the various virtues he thought he should cultivate, and tells the story of how he worked on each one. He says he made one fatal mistake in his plan to become perfect in every virtue. He left humility for last, and by the time he got to it, he was already so near perfection in every other area that humility was impossible.¹ We may get caught in the same trap, thinking we are doing everything we can to help others, without drawing attention to ourselves. Maybe we think we could even teach a class on humility.

Sarah Dylan, an Episcopal priest offers some ways to practice humility:

When driving, especially in rush hour or in particularly nasty traffic, take that instinct (finely honed in most experienced commuters!) to look for the fastest-moving lane and cut into it by any means necessary, and use those instincts to look for opportunities to make the drive easier, faster, and less stressful for someone else. The person who just really enraged you by driving by you on the shoulder and then trying to cut back into the lane would be a particularly good person to practice with: the point is not to try to reward another nice driver, but to give up the position of judging who deserves to be let in ahead of you. Pick one day a month or one day a week to try it until you get to a point where you actually prefer driving this way.

Maybe you don't drive. Here's something that we all (including, or maybe even especially young people in school) have opportunities to do: practice looking around you for the person you think has the most reason to be ashamed, and then look for opportunities to say or do something that makes this person feel genuinely honored and appreciated.

As we practice these things, which may be difficult, we are reminded that humility is not a simple topic and becoming humble is a lifelong process that we will do well at some times and not at all other times. But there is also something deeper, beyond what is apparent. When we were discussing the gospel

¹ Paraphrased from Dylan's lectionary blog. http://www.sarahlaughed.net/lectionary/2004/08/proper_17_year_.html

lesson in the pastor's periscope study, I noticed the text said, "Jesus told them a parable". I was asked if it made a difference and I initially replied that I did not know. As I thought about it throughout the week, however, I think that it does make a difference in how we interpret this lesson, leading us from the obvious topic of humility leaping out from the page to what the deeper lesson is for us today.

As we move deeper beyond mere humility, we discover that like many parables, this one is about our relationship with God. Underneath the many acts of pride and humility lies worry about how we appear to others. As much as we may criticize the Pharisees for their jockeying for position, we have to remember that we engage in that behavior as well. Sometimes it means that we attend a workshop or dinner even when we think it will be a waste of time, in order to use it as an opportunity to network with those important in our field. Or we may accept an invitation to a dinner party, just to have a chance to be seen by the important people also in attendance.

In this parable, Jesus is inviting us to move beyond worrying about what others think of us so we can discover our true worth. We can choose to continue and base our self-worth on what others think of us but then our self-worth is little more than flighty and often undependable opinions. We are only worthwhile to others as long as they get something out of being attached to us.

Our true worth comes in the fact that we are children of God. God has claimed us at our baptism and promises to never leave us. This comes to us as complete gift. We do not earn it through our humility or any other behavior no matter how good that behavior is. As we contemplate this wonderful gift, we are lead towards wholeness, acceptance of all in love. We will realize that perhaps we all are a bit lame when we refuse to walk where we are being led, and/or a bit blind when we refuse to see the goodness right in front of our eyes. The gift sets us free from the burden of worrying about what others think of us and we rest in the complete acceptance of God. We are freed to risk and invite whoever we want to our party in love because our trust is placed in the one who will always support us.

The dinner with Jesus is probably not one we would have wanted to attend due to all the tension. But Jesus is leading us towards a grander dinner where all will be invited, all will have enough to eat, and all will be completely whole and loved. Thanks be to God!

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