

Humility: Peace, Sweetness and a Delighted Tranquility

Luke 14:1, 7-11; Luke 18:9-14

Focus: All who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.—Luke 14:11; 18:14.

A person is not usually called upon to have an opinion of his own talents at all, since he can very well go on improving them to the best of his ability without deciding on his own precise niche in the Temple of Fame.—C.S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*

The connotation [of humility] is always of peace, sweetness, and a kind of suspension of the heart in a delighted tranquility.—Dorothy Sayers, *Dante: The Divine Comedy II*

First Scripture Lesson: Luke 14:1, 7-11

Every teacher has his or her favorite sayings, things they say again and again—things their students repeat and may even laugh about, but always, always remember.

Sometimes, especially when they're written down, these sayings become part of what's called a "wisdom tradition," that is, a collection of sayings, anecdotes, parables, and stories valued, repeated, and passed down, because they have something to teach us—about living a good life, about being a good person, about what it means to be human.

In the Bible, the Book of Proverbs is part of the wisdom tradition, with sayings like: "Pride goeth before a fall," "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom," as is the book of Ecclesiastes, "Vanity, vanity, all is vanity—there is nothing new under the sun."

In the New Testament, when Jesus tells parables, he's a teacher in the wisdom tradition, taking a saying from the Old Testament, and then illustrating and re-interpreting it, as he applies it to the present situation. He's part of a tradition.

But it's not just in the Bible; wisdom traditions are everywhere: universal and ongoing, intersecting and interacting, they are living traditions.

The sayings of Ben Franklin, Billie Holliday, Mark Twain, Eleanor Roosevelt and many others can be seen as part of an American wisdom tradition. But it's not

only them. Their voices intersect and interact with those of Buddha and Confucius, Marcus Aurelius, Maimonides, and Mohammed, Shakespeare, your Uncle Steve and my beloved Latin teacher, Mr Shaw.

That's the thing about wisdom: it's both universal and particular, timeless and timely. The sayings, stories, anecdotes, and parables express some kind of universal truth, but one that has to be interpreted and applied to your particular situation, a process that itself requires wisdom.

And so a good wisdom saying is accessible: catchy and memorable; but also deep: you can spend your whole life—several lives, generations in fact—pondering and applying it.

And so a good wisdom saying is like a Zen Koan (themselves part of a wisdom tradition): it poses both a puzzle and a challenge: "When both hands are clapped a sound is produced; listen to the sound of one hand clapping."

It doesn't tell us what to do as much as it invites us to think and ask—ask about what it means to live a good life, be a good person, to be human.

So Jesus, like every good teacher, has his favorite sayings, things he says again and again—things his students must have repeated and even laughed about, but always, always remembered. Here's one: "All who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted."

True to form, in saying this, Jesus reaches back into the wisdom tradition. A version of this saying can be found in the Book of Proverbs Chapter 29, verse 23: "A person's pride will bring humiliation, but one who is lowly in spirit will obtain honor."

But if you listen closely, you can hear how Jesus' recasting of it makes it both more memorable and deeper, more of a puzzle and more of a challenge:

All who exalt themselves will be humbled, but **all** who humble themselves will be exalted."

So the challenge of the wisdom tradition: how do **we** interpret this, how do we apply it to **our** particular situations? What does it tell **us** about living a good life, being a good person, being human?

Jesus gives us—and the disciples—some help: He interprets this saying in two different places, each time with a parable.

The first is at a banquet, hosted by a leader of the Pharisees, to which Jesus and his disciples have been invited. Listen now for God's Word to us: Luke 14, verse 1 and then verses 7-11:

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 he 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, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.”

The Word of the Lord.

Second Scripture Lesson: Luke 18:9-14

Same saying, different setting, different illustrative parable. The parable of the banquet seating seemed to be about only human-to-human relationships, although (as I'll explain later) I think the human-to-God relationship is implicit throughout it. But in this second parable makes that human-to-God relationship becomes explicit. Listen now for God's Word to us. Luke, 18, verses 9-14:

Jesus also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt:

“Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.’

But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’

I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.”

The Word of the Lord.

Sermon

If you’ve ever planned a wedding reception or a banquet or even just attended one, you know that this whole question of who sits where and with whom, not to mention whether seating will be assigned or open, matters—matters a lot.

And so it was in the the ancient world. It mattered enough that the ancient philosopher, biographer, magistrate and diplomat, Plutarch, devotes an entire chapter to these questions in his book, *Moralia*, which roughly translated means something like *Customs and Manners*. (Plutarch himself is part of the ancient wisdom tradition.)

And at first glance, Jesus’ parable seems right in line with Plutarch’s *Customs and Manners*: a piece of better-safe-than-sorry, practical, social advice.

The worst thing that could happen would be—perhaps in your confusion over whether it’s open or assigned seating—would be for you to take a seat of high honor, only to have the host then visibly move you to a far less prestigious place. Total embarrassment! Better to play it safe: take a lowly seat—and who knows?—maybe the host will take notice and move you up to a higher one, and then won’t you look good!

“Who knows?” “Maybe”—did you catch how I snuck in the qualifications? I did that because, truth is, in this world, sometimes relentless self-promotion works: it can get you the best seat in the house, the highest places of honor, in the ancient world, for sure, and yes, even in our own modern world (or so I’ve heard). And sometimes a modest unwillingness to claim one’s rightful place can leave you sitting, unnoticed in the shadows all night, maybe even all life, long.

But Jesus offers no such qualifications. Instead, he says:

All who exalt themselves *will* be humbled, but **all** who humble themselves *will* be exalted.”

So what gives? How can Jesus make this a guarantee that applies to everyone? Why would Jesus draw such a sweeping conclusion from a parable that doesn't seem to warrant it?

Well, like a Zen Master with a Koan—Jesus is presenting both a puzzle and a challenge, not telling us what to do at the next banquet we attend, but inviting us to think and ask: what makes for a good life and a good person, what does it mean to be human. Inviting us **and** the Pharisees too, because as Jesus says later in Luke's Gospel, the Pharisees "love to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets."

We tend to think of pride as an overestimation of one's own worth and accomplishments relative to others: "Look I did this; Look at me: I'm a big deal; me, me me!"

And we tend to think of its opposite humility in just the opposite way: an underestimation of (or at least not claiming credit for) our worth and accomplishment: Oh that? It's nothing really, I hardly did anything at all; me?—no big deal: No, no, no."

And that's all true as far as it goes. Often, that **is** the way pride and humility manifest themselves in our human-to-human relationships. But to leave it there is to read Jesus' parable as nothing more than a piece of better-safe-than-sorry, practical, social advice. And it's more than that; it goes deeper than that; it goes to the heart of our human-to-God relationship. And to see that, all we need do is look at the Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector.

"Two men went up to the temple to pray"—True, but only one ends up praying. Oh the Pharisee, looks like he's praying, he seems to be addressing God, thanking God for making him just the man he is: holy and righteous, deserving of the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets.

But look where his attention is focused, not on God, but over there, on the tax collector: he's comparing himself to him—just how much better he is than him and all those others like him—sinners all! If God is involved at all in the Pharisee's prayer, it's only as a bystander to nod approvingly as the Pharisee enumerates his manifest superiorities.

Two is really a wonderful age, isn't it? Two-year-olds show us so much about ourselves. A two-year-old child is just beginning to get his legs under him—both literally and figuratively. When they turn two, they're not just walking but beginning to run, they can climb first a stair or two, holding your hands, and then

jump down; and pretty soon, by the time they're almost three, it's the whole staircase on their own, alternating feet on each step.

Figuratively, they're growing into their distinctively human powers: they have thoughts—and wills!—of their own: they can say “yes” or “no” to anything and everything, but especially “no,” especially to their parents.

When my eldest daughter, Maya, was two, her favorite thing to say was, “I do it ah-self.” And it was true: she could do everything herself, except pronounce the first letter of her own name—Maya—which somehow eluded her.

Two-year-olds show us ourselves, our humanity. Our human powers are great, without equal: we are made in the image of God, and entrusted with the care of God's creation. Two-year-olds show us that.

But almost as great as our human powers is our temptation to pride—our susceptibility to overestimate ourselves and our powers, thinking we can do everything ourselves, without anyone else, even without God, and assuming that it's all about me, me, me and and what I, I, I want.

We humans can be willful and self-absorbed to the point of self-endangerment even to the self-destruction, and the destruction of our planet. Two-year-olds show us that too. There is a little two-year-old in all of us.

And that Pharisee who went up to the temple to pray? What else is he saying but “I do it ah-self”? I can make ah-self righteous; I can make ah-self good. Look God—me, me, me—just look at how much better I am than **him** over there.

The Pharisee is an example of pride—he wants to substitute his own judgment for God's although he is magnanimous enough to give God the opportunity to concur with his judgment. Big of him isn't it?

It's paradigmatic pride: in the same way Satan tempted Adam and Eve, by awakening their pride: “Eat this fruit and and you can be like God, knowing good and evil.” In other words, it's about **you** and **your** judgment, **you** can have the last word and the first, **you** don't need God, it's all about you, you, you. You can be like God.

“Pride goeth before a Fall.” “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom”—our wisdom tradition challenges us to think about what makes for a good life and a good person, about what it means to be human.

In contrast to the Pharisee, the tax collector, his head lowered beating his breast, really is praying to God: “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!” He exemplifies humility—he recognizes that it is God’s judgment, not his, that matters, he recognizes that he needs God and God’s mercy, that he is nothing without God.

So here’s **my** prayer today: “Thank you, Jesus, thank you! Thank you that I am not like all those other people, especially like that Pharisee in your parable, and today’s modern equivalents (and I assume you know who they are, but if not I will gladly point them out to you!)

“Jesus: Thank you! Thank you for making me the humble person I am: by birth, accomplishments, and position, so deserving—so much more than deserving—of **all** the honors that I have already received, and in fact, worthy of so many, many more greater honors that for some inexplicable reason I have yet to receive, while others, far less deserving, have received them—you might want to get on that, Jesus, my recognition is way overdue! Amen.”

One Sunday, a man went up into the pulpit to pray—but did he ever really pray? There is a little Pharisee in all of us—maybe more than a little in some of us.

Our pride takes many, many forms—their number is legion. Sometimes, we don’t even recognize it ourselves—although others usually do. Sometimes, our pride even disguises itself as humility. But there’s always one telltale sign, one thing that inevitably accompanies our human pride: invidious comparison.

Invidious comparison—that is, the need to prove our worth, our righteousness, by comparison to others, by claiming our inherent superiority to others. It’s as if somewhere deep inside ourselves, we know that we are **not** God, we know that we need God, that we are vulnerable; somewhere deep inside ourselves, we know that all flesh is grass, that the nations are as a drop in a bucket, and are counted as the small dust of the balance; somewhere deep inside ourselves we know that we are nothing without God.

But we don’t want to admit that, that little two-year-old inside us won’t admit it. So we take our human powers and the accomplishments that come from them—all of which are in truth gifts from God—and claim them as entirely our own (Look, I did this!), and we lord them over others as if we ourselves were God.

And to sustain ourselves in that delusion, we demand—clamor for, obsess about, devote all our best energies to, and indeed, waste our very selves on—to be recognized, to get the best seat at the banquet. “Look at me: I’m a big deal: me,

me, me; Don't you see look at where I'm sitting? Can't you hear the applause? God? Are you there, God?"

"Vanity, vanity, all is vanity—there is nothing new under the sun."

"When both hands are clapped a sound is produced; listen to the sound of one hand clapping." Be still and know that I am God.

And for goodness sakes, relax. Give it a rest, will ya?. I mean really all this clamoring for recognition is not only futile and deluded, it's exhausting. We can after all, as C.S. Lewis says, very well go on improving our God-given talents to the best of our ability without deciding on our own precise niche in the Temple of Fame. In fact, if we stop worrying about our precise niche in the temple of Fame, we will no doubt do a better job of improving our God-given talents.

"Comparison is the death of joy." Like many other sayings from the wisdom tradition, it's not certain who said this, although it's variously attributed to Theodore Rosevelt, Mark Twain, and C.S. Lewis. ("The internet is the death of accurate attribution."—my contribution to the wisdom tradition.)

But it is true nonetheless—that comparison is the death of joy, I mean. That's why Dorothy Sayers said that true humility is always peace, sweetness, and a kind of suspension of the heart in a delighted tranquility. It frees us from the delusions of our pride, and the invidious comparisons we use to try to sustain those delusions, and allows us to know joy, the joy of developing our gifts in service to others for the glory of God, the joy of knowing that we are loved by God.

And the way to that joy—and the example of true humility—is the one who told those parables, who said what he said to the Pharisees. For he, and he alone, is truly worthy of the seat of honor at the great banquet. And yet he humbled himself, taking the form of a servant, so that we might know the joy of sitting at table with him.

All who exalt themselves *will* be humbled, but **all** who humble themselves *will* be exalted."

The Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.