

Humble Hospitality

In our Gospel reading for this morning, Jesus illuminates two different worldviews. One is the worldview apparently adopted by his host and many of the guests: a worldview that places an emphasis on the pursuit of human power, even in social situations where grace would seem to be a natural course, and gives free rein to human pride of self. The other is the worldview of Jesus and of His Father. That is a worldview of humility, of emptying power, and of true hospitality. The writings of that 2nd Century B.C. Jewish scholar, Yeshua ben Sira, which were our first reading today, point to the breach between God and those who follow the first worldview, a point made almost as fiercely by Jesus in the immediate sequel to our Gospel reading. But what does this tale of an ancient dinner party gone awry have to say to us? Can it be that there is still a danger for us of being caught up in the meshes of over-weening pride and the social games of respect and position? Do we still have something to learn about Jesus' way of humble hospitality? Or have we already given up boasting and poured contempt on all our pride? When we throw a party, what kind of party do we throw?

In the Middle East, both in the time of Jesus and in the present, the quest for honor is perhaps only slightly less important than the quest for food and shelter. One's self-image is dependent upon the honor and respect which is given by others. The amount of respect given is also equal to the amount of power which one holds over the other. To be respected, to be honored, is to be powerful in society, to have the ability to make things happen according to one's own will. Jesus spoke often on the moral bankruptcy of this approach to life. Later in Luke's Gospel, we find him pointing to the ostentatious style of religious leaders: "Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and love to be greeted with respect in the market-places, and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honour at banquets." In language very similar to that he uses at the Pharisee's party, Jesus also tells his disciples this story in Luke's Gospel: "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.' "But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.' "I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted." For those whom Jesus cited as bad examples, honor was everything, honor from their fellows, from their so-called inferiors, even from God.

This strong desire for honor, to have one's pride assuaged, to be recognized as "somebody," is still strong in our culture today. Consider the popularity of award banquets and even of televised award shows. In my life in the theatre, even as we applauded those actors and artists who exclaimed, "I don't believe in talent contests between professionals," we also celebrated the televised showings of the Tonys, the Emmys and, of course, the Oscars as highlights on our annual social calendars. If you want to hear a bunch of rabid opinions and scurrilous gossip about movies and their creators, try attending an Oscar party with a bunch of theatre people sometime. But this modern quest for respect isn't always even as benign as the sort of genial character assassination that happens in "the Biz." Ask Colleen or any other current high school student some time about what sort of violence can erupt on or around campus when the wrong person feels like they've been "dissed," disrespected. Our popular culture also gives us many examples of just how deadly serious the modern search for honor can be, from songs by rappers and stories of gang-bangers to our most "respected" modern films. A quick search on "Respect"

on Google will quickly take you to a popular poster, suitable for framing, that quotes perhaps the ultimate movie about the dangers of the hunt for respect, Francis Ford Coppola's adaptation of Mario Puzo's novel, The Godfather. Perhaps you remember the scene that the poster quotes. It's at the beginning of the movie. Don Vito Corleone is hosting his daughter's wedding. In good Sicilian tradition, he takes the opportunity to receive both gifts and petitions from guests. The undertaker, Bonasera comes to him, seeking retribution on men who attacked his daughter. Don Corleone reminds him that he has forgotten something very important: "We've known each other many years, but this is the first time you ever came to me for counsel or for help. I can't remember the last time that you invited me to your house for a cup of coffee, even though my wife is godmother to your only child... But uh, now you come to me and you say - 'Don Corleone, give me justice.' But you don't ask with *respect*. You don't offer friendship. You don't even think to call me Godfather."

It is easy for us to be horrified at such extreme portrayals of the evil of pride, of seeking after power and respect. But it is an evil that runs deep in our cultural DNA. In his book, The Call to Downward Mobility, Kenneth L. Carder writes, "Everybody wants to be somebody. Since the dawn of history, human beings have been trying to move up the scale of importance. The clincher used by the serpent to tempt Adam and Eve was "when you eat of [the tree of good and evil], your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil"." This is a point that Sirach understood well. "The beginning of human pride is to forsake the Lord; the heart has withdrawn from its Maker." Too often, we insist on being masters of our own fates, captains of our own souls, when we should be relying on the grace and love of God. Henry Nouwen calls it replacing love with power. "The long painful history of the church," Nouwen writes, "is the history of people ever and again tempted to choose power over love, control over the cross, being a leader over being led."

Yes, the lure of power and pride shows up even in the Church. I know you are all as shocked as I was to hear that. But pride shows up in other places in our society besides such obviously criminal organizations as the Crips, the Cosa Nostra and the institutional Church. It's been my great pleasure during my non-profit career to make the acquaintance of some truly outstanding philanthropists. Very few of them were immune to pride, to hubris. Do you know that Greek word? It means "excessive pride or self-confidence; arrogance" according to the Random House Unabridged Dictionary. It's the sort of pride that the author of Proverbs was talking about when he wrote, "Pride goeth before destruction, and an haughty spirit before a fall." I mention hubris because of an experience I had in Louisville. One of the major employers in that city is the health-care and insurance giant, Humana. The company's founders, David Jones and Wendell Cherry, were two of the most dedicated donors to the arts and social services in Louisville. They were charming guys, more modest than you might suspect, and nearly universally respected, even revered. They also contributed to the revitalization of Main Street in Louisville with the construction of a beautiful headquarters building, designed by the world-famous Michael Graves; a soaring and unique tower of pink granite and marble. Despite the building's beauty, it always made me vaguely uneasy to walk through its front portico, for there, over the front doors facing out onto the busy street of cars and pedestrians, in the sort of elegant engraved lettering one would expect at a Greek temple and enriched with gold leaf, was the single word, Humana. Except every time I looked at it, my eyes would swim and the letters would slightly rearrange

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themselves: Hubris. It gave me the same pricking at the back of my neck that I experience when I read Percy Bysshe Shelley's most famous short poem, "Ozymandias":

I met a traveler from an antique land
Who said: Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desert. Near them on the sand,
Half sunk, a shatter'd visage lies, whose frown
And wrinkled lip and sneer of cold command
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read
Which yet survive, stamp'd on these lifeless things,
The hand that mock'd them and the heart that fed.
And on the pedestal these words appear:
"My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:
Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair!"
Nothing beside remains: round the decay
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare,
The lone and level sands stretch far away.

Shelley's poem and that magnificent building both represent to me the sort of hubris, the sort of pride that Sirach said led only to destruction. Whether we attribute the destruction to the wrath of God or simply to the natural consequences of human behavior is all one. Pride leads to destruction all the same, for empires, for corporations, for wedding guests who usurp the best seats without invitation.

Thinking of Mr. Jones, Mr. Cherry and the many other donors and board members with whom I've worked over the years leads me to another modern reflection of our Gospel story. There's a sort of social dance or game that goes on among board members of various non-profits that is similar and sometimes identical to the round of socially obligating dinners and invitations to which Jesus refers when he advises his host to invite the poor occasionally instead of the expected guests. Now, just as in the ancient Middle East, a dinner invitation obligates the recipient to a return invitation. Likewise, when one philanthropically-minded board member for Organization A asks his neighbor, who is a board member for Organization B, to donate to A, the expectation is that the first donor will at some point reciprocate with a like gift to B. When I was managing director at one theatre, we had a board president who was a never ending source of frustration for me and my development staff. This fellow was incredibly well-connected in the philanthropic community but he would never bring his deep-pocketed friends to the theatre or introduce them to us so we could "make the ask." Our only conclusion was that while he liked the honor of being a board president, his commitment didn't extend to obligating himself to his friends on our behalf. Like Jesus' Pharisaic host, he was still caught up in the round of respect, still not quite willing to do his all for those who could not help him in return.

The advice that the observant Jesus gave to the pushy guests at that dinner shouldn't have taken them by surprise. It's an almost exact quotation from Proverbs 25:6-7: "Do not put yourself forward in the king's presence or stand in the place of the great; for it is better to be told, 'Come up here', than to be put lower in the presence of a noble." As opposed to those guests who sought the best seats of honor, respect and pride, Jesus calls for us to take the lowest place. It is the approach he himself used, for what place can be lower than the cross, the form of execution used for the most miserable criminals? Jesus calls us to follow the way of humility rather than

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the way of pride. New Advent, the online Catholic encyclopedia, defines the virtue of humility, in part, as submission to others; letting them have the best seat, perhaps. Paul understood this, for as he wrote to the Ephesians, “Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.” We are called, in other words, to seek not power but love, just as Jesus did. When I think of that choice on the part of Jesus, I cannot but think of Paul’s letter to the Philippians, in which he wrote, “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.”

As we hear Jesus’ call to the Pharisees to give others the prime places, to invite those who cannot repay, I hope we hear our own call to humble service. The Jesuit scholar, Dean Brackey, cites the founder of his order, Ignatius of Loyola in this regard. Brackey writes, “Ignatius argues that typically the enemy will try to undo us by getting us to have too many things and to think of ourselves too highly. The best strategy to avoid the pitfalls is one of humility and humble service and solidarity with the poor.” Sarah Dylan Breuer, an Episcopal church historian, goes Brackey one better by suggesting some concrete examples of how we may practice humble service to others. “When driving, especially in rush hour or in particularly nasty traffic, take that instinct 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. 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.” For those who don’t drive, particularly students, she suggests looking for the person whom no one honors, the outcast, and finding “opportunities to say or do something that makes this person feel genuinely honored and appreciated.”

Does this sound hopelessly idealistic? In what sort of place could these things really happen? I’d like to take a cue from the setting of our Gospel story and reach back one week to my sermon on Sabbath-keeping. This story and Jesus’ teaching on humble service is set on the Sabbath, the day in which we celebrate the in-breaking reality of the Kingdom of God. In his book, The Sabbath, Abraham Joshua Heschel writes, “There is a realm of time where the goal is not to have but to be, not to own but to give, not to control, but to share.” But the resurrection of Jesus means that the reach of that realm, that Kingdom, has been extended into every day, for as this congregation loves to sing, Every Morning is Easter Morning. Every day dawns with the possibility of the Kingdom of God, the Beloved Community, the Wedding Banquet of Christ, becoming just a little more widespread, the whole of Creation coming closer to redemption and freedom. Part of the way in which we are to be faithful to Jesus and to walk in his way is to be sure that the invitations to the party go to all, even those we’re not too sure we want to be seen with. For us, the time is coming and now is when our goal indeed should be to give, to share, without stinting.

Humility can be difficult, perhaps impossible for us to achieve when we are feeling the blessing of being a beloved child of God, as indeed we should. Perhaps it is one of those virtues that we must practice even if we do not feel its reality, giving place to others even when we KNOW we deserve the honor. Perhaps our relationship to humility is like Hamlet’s advice to Gertrude:

Assume a virtue, if you have it not.

That monster custom, who all sense doth eat,

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Of habits evil, is angel yet in this,--
That to the use of actions fair and good
He likewise gives a frock or livery
That aptly is put on...
For use almost can change the stamp of nature,
And either curb the devil, or throw him out
With wondrous potency.

As we practice humility, we open ourselves to the working of the Holy Spirit in our lives to produce true humility and love, bringing us closer to the example which Jesus set.

That example, in the view of the Australian theologian William Loader, is summed up in “an inclusive love, all embracing, which is its own reward.” Jesus rather slyly held out the prospect of blessing to the Pharisees in language which he knew would resonate with them, for it was a point of theological honor for those careful interpreters of the Law that they believed in a universal bodily resurrection. But if our resurrection day, our Easter, is indeed every day, then so is our day of reward. As we are blessed each day by God’s mercy to be included amongst the righteous, so too do we receive the rewards of righteous humility. We grow to discover that loving others is its own reward, and a mighty reward it is.

And so we come to celebrate that self-giving love. As Loader writes, “The table at which we share celebrates a poured out life, even in brokenness, as the true source of nourishment and before which we can let go our anxieties and the hierarchies of power they create.” Thanks to the gift of Christ Jesus, which we commemorate with our celebration of the Lord’s Supper, we are freed from the trap of power, honor, respect and pride. We are freed to love one another as Christ loved us, with humility, with hospitality and with joy. Thanks be to God.