

Luke 14:1, 7-14

St. Marks Episcopal Church – August 28, 2022

12th Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 17C – Track 2

William H. Grow, Jr.

Humility and Compassion

Our lessons today provide two items that caused me to do further exploration. They are humility and compassion. The first, humility, is rather easy to see in the Gospel reading for today. Jesus tells us in the parable that it is better to take a lower ranking seat than to choose a higher ranking seat. By doing so, one may be honored when the host or hostess asks you to take a seat higher up on the table. Taking a seat high on the table by yourself may result in embarrassment if you are asked to move to a lower seat.

In Dante's "Divine Comedy", humility is listed as the most important of seven virtues. It holds this place because it is the opposite of what Dante considers to be the worst of the seven deadly sins, Pride. Humility is total trust in God and surrender to His will.

As Dante stated, the opposite of humility is pride. And, Proverbs 16:18 says, "Pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall." Many of us have heard this capsulated as, "Pride goeth before the fall." Many of us have heard this as "Pride goes before the fall.

Ecclesiasticus, or Sirach, is a book of moral and practical maxims and ethical teachings from around 2 BC. While it is not a book of the Bible, it is often retained in an appendix to the Bible called the Apocrypha. As we heard in the first reading, it states, "The beginning of human pride is to forsake the Lord; the heart has withdrawn from its Maker." This suggests that pride is formed when we are not willing to trust God. It blurs our vision by aiming it inward. The parable in our Gospel extols the virtues of humility and hospitality.

It seems to me that hospitality has become transactional. You invited me to your wedding, now I must invite you to mine; you invited me to your birthday party, now I must invite you to mine; and so on and so forth. Hospitality is not a transaction. It should be unconditional, offered in love, with no obligations attached to it.

Offering hospitality, real, unconditional hospitality, offered in love with no attachments, can be risky. Authentic hospitality requires a willingness on our part to enter into events and relationships where we cannot control the outcome.

It means creating an environment where even the outcast will be welcome. If that is the case, one should not be surprised or upset if they come. After all, they too are God's children and are in need of love and understanding.

When we are connected to God, authentic hospitality becomes a byproduct. We accept the outcast in ourselves and enter into relationships with openness and humility.

Did the Pharisees invite Jesus to dinner out of love? Were they being hospitable? I don't think so. Based on the statement that, "they were watching Him", I think they were looking for a way to humble Him, to knock Him down a couple of pegs. What they found is that you can't humble someone who chooses to humble him or her self. Jesus tells the Pharisees, "For all who exalt themselves will be humbled and those that humble themselves will be exalted."

I have talked a lot about hospitality. Perhaps this could be another term for compassion. If you think about it, Jesus spent a lot of time with the outcasts of His day. The poor, the sick, the weak, the blind, the socially disenfranchised. He seemed to be very comfortable in their presence.

John 4:1-42 tells the story of an encounter between Jesus and a Samaritan woman at the well. She is going to the well at about noon, which is unusual because the women of the day would normally go to the well early in the morning. He asks the woman if she would give him a drink and starts a conversation with her. During this conversation, he shows her that he knows all about her and why she is coming to the well so late. She is a social outcast. First, she is a woman. Next, she is a Samaritan and therefore a lower caste than a Jewish person. And third, she has had five husbands and is currently not married but is living with a sixth man. Because of this, she is even rejected by her own people. But Jesus gives her value by asking her for a drink and speaking with her. He later reveals He is the Messiah. She believes Him and becomes a compelling advocate for the credibility of Christ. This is not an uncommon occurrence for Jesus.

It is not always easy to show compassion for those who are down on their luck or in a bad way due to circumstance brought on by their own actions or because of the whole economic situation in the country, state or city where we live. Also, sometimes those working the system jade our perception of those seeking our help.

When I worked in Baltimore I would often park in a garage and then walk to the offices of various clients. I always carried a couple one dollar bills in my pocket

and would give them to homeless people I encountered on the way. Some were very thankful, others, not so much. Some were just downright scoundrels.

There is one woman I remember. She looked really down on her luck and would stand in the island in the middle of the street with a sign asking for money for food for her babies. I would always give her a dollar when I was stopped at the light. Then one day, I was traveling in a different direction when I saw the lady walk down the street and get into her shiny Cadillac SUV and drive off. For a long while, I was jaded to the circumstance of those asking for help. But, this did not stop me from trying to help the homeless. I eventually got over it, but it stuck with me, in the back of my mind.

Carol and I volunteer with several organizations here in town. The food bank, starting points, the hospital auxiliary and homeless coalition to name a few. The homeless still have a place near to my heart. Some are victims of circumstance; some are victims of their own doing. Many are alcoholics or drug abusers. Some just need a little help to get back on their feet. All of them have a story and they want to tell their story if anyone will listen. Carol is very good at listening to their stories and showing them compassion when they need it. They don't want to be told how to fix themselves or be told that they need to quit what they are doing to harm themselves. They just want someone to talk to and let them feel like they are worthwhile.

We still get burned by those working the system, but more often than not our actions are enough to help a person get back on their feet. I believe this is what Jesus wants us to be doing. To help those on the outer ranks of society feel they have worth.

The Spanish saint, Teresa of Avila had this prayer which portrays our role in support of God. It is titled, "You Are Christ's Hands". Let us pray.

Christ has no body now on earth but yours,
no hands but yours,
no feet but yours.
Yours are the eyes through which to look out
Christ's compassion to the world.
Yours are the feet with which he is to go about doing good;
Yours are the hands with which he is to bless men now.
Amen