



FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

“THE HUMBLE WILL BE EXALTED”

Scripture Lessons: Daniel 2:24-30; Luke 14:7-14

*This sermon was preached by Dr. L. Holton Siegling, Jr. on Sunday, September 1, 2019
at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church in Charleston, South Carolina.*

Luke 14:7-14

When he noticed how the guests chose the places of honour, he told them a parable. ‘When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not sit down at the place of honour, 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 honoured in the presence of all who sit at the table with you. For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.’

He said also to the one who had invited him, ‘When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbours, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.’

Leader: This is the Word of the Lord.

People: Thanks be to God.

Let us pray...

Almighty and Everlasting God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing, acceptable, and even joyful in your sight, for you are our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

I ran across a story about Booker T. Washington, that renowned educator and exceedingly strong leader from within the African American community at the turn of the century. The story goes that shortly after he assumed the presidency of the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, he was walking in a rather exclusive section of town when he was stopped by one of its wealthy residents. Not knowing Mr. Washington by sight, this woman asked if he would like to earn a few dollars by chopping some wood for her. Because he had no pressing business at the moment, Professor Washington smiled, rolled up his sleeves, and proceeded to do the humble task she had requested. When he was finished, he carried the logs into the house and stacked them by the fireplace.

At some point during the afternoon a neighbor happened to recognize him and later revealed his identity to the lady. The next morning, the woman who was most embarrassed, went to see Mr. Washington in his office and apologized profusely. "It's perfectly all right, Madam," he replied. "Occasionally I enjoy a little manual labor. Besides, it's always a delight to do something for a friend" (Our Daily Bread).

I think it's safe to say that the gift of a humble heart can be a rare and precious gift indeed! The prophet Isaiah talks about it like this: "All these things my hand has made, and so all these things are mine, says the Lord. But this is the one to whom I will look, to the humble and contrite in spirit, who trembles at my word." Oh, let us never confuse humility with weakness or a kind of groveling lack of self-worth. The Bible tells us that, "the man Moses was very humble, more so than anyone else on the face of the earth" (Numbers 12:3); yet, surely, we would not consider Moses to be a pushover!

Or consider Daniel, who in our Old Testament Lesson this morning, has been granted insight and understanding into King Nebuchadnezzar's dream. In contrast to Arioch, a member of the King's court, who amounts to little more than a self-promoter, and who says to the King: "I have found among the exiles from Judah a man who can tell the king the interpretation." Daniel, on the other hand, when he is asked by the king if he is able to explain the dream and its interpretation, Daniel with great faith and self-awareness essentially says, "No." There is no human who can reveal this to you, oh, king, but there is a God in heaven who can!" Daniel is not disparaging himself, but he was directing attention toward God.

Perhaps it is the Apostle Paul who comes to our mind - a man who had every right to be proud. He was smart, a Roman citizen. Everyone knew him; he was a successful church planter...but listen to how he describes himself in 1 Corinthians 15:9..."For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle because I persecuted the church of God." This is the same man who elsewhere refers to himself as "the least of all the saints."

In this morning's lectionary reading, we come across a somewhat familiar parable which further illustrates this virtue of humility. It is a parable about a wedding banquet, and at this banquet some people choose to sit in very good seats, and, by that, I mean that they were prestigious seats / seats of honor. They were the kind of seats that people look at and say about the person sitting in them, "Boy, they must be really important!"

And it is not that Jesus would never have us to sit there, mind you, but to presume that such a seat is ours to begin with; well, therein lies the problem. Jesus goes on to summarize the essence of the parable by saying this, "For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."

Now, Jesus clearly knew a great deal about being humble. He is, after all, the one about whom it would be said, "...though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but rather 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" (cf. Philippians 2:6-8).

Isn't it wonderful to know that this is the nature of God's love, and we are called to emulate it. But how exactly do we do that? I mean, how do we truly bear witness to a humble spirit? Well, considering how it was that on the heels of this morning's parable Jesus talked about hospitality, perhaps as good a place to begin as any is for us to cultivate a spirit that is other-centered, a spirit that is inwardly strong, for sure, but one that is also clearly outwardly focused.

Many years ago, when Fred Craddock was a young preacher right out of seminary, he pastored a small church in Oak Ridge, Tennessee. At that time, Oak Ridge was rapidly expanding. Many of the newcomers lived in a mobile home park located near the church. The park was packed with newcomers, including a large number of children. Fred saw all those new people and thought the church should reach out to them. So at the next Board meeting, Fred recommended a plan to reach out to them. "Oh, I don't know," said the chairman of the board, "they might not fit in here very well." Fred said, "But they live right next to our church. I think we should invite them to worship with us."

They decided to table the discussion and deal with it at their next board meeting. At the next meeting a member said, "I move that in order to be a member of this church you have to own property in the county." "I'll second that motion," said another man. Fred was mortified and spoke against it, but, in the end, the motion passed, and, as a result, no effort was made to reach out to the newcomers.

Sometime thereafter, Fred Craddock was called to another church. About twenty years later after that, Fred and his wife, Nettie, were driving past Oak Ridge on a trip through Tennessee. Since he was single when he served that church and his wife had never seen it, he decided to show it to her. As they drove to the church, Fred told his wife that painful story about the church refusing to reach out to newcomers.

It took a while to find the church. Lots of new roads and homes had been built in the area. But they finally found the spot. The beautiful white frame church was sitting there as always, but something was different. There was a big parking lot out front full of cars, trucks, motor homes and motorcycles. As they pulled into the lot they saw a big sign in front of the building. It said, "BBQ: All You Can Eat." The church had become a restaurant!

Fred and his wife went inside, and the place was packed with all kinds of people - white and black and Hispanic, rich and poor, southerners and northerners – "all the children of the world," we might say. Fred said to his wife, "It's a good thing this isn't a church anymore. If it were, these people wouldn't be allowed in." Though we can't imagine a situation like that ourselves, sadly, that is, all-too-often, the posture of the human heart...but, praise be to God, that is not the posture of the heart of the Divine!

In this morning's New Testament Lesson, Jesus shows us that life is to be lived not only with a modest opinion of one's self-worth, but also a desire to elevate others, to build them up, and to do so without any expectation of getting something in return. In other words, humility is not simply a matter of "not" taking the best seats, it is a matter of giving those seats to someone else.

A fine blend of these complimenting virtues comes to us from a story about a young college student named Bill. Bill had wild hair, and wore a nose ring; he always wore a T-shirt with holes in it, blue jeans and no shoes. He was a brilliant young man, became a Christian while attending college. He attended a Christian organization on campus, but he also wanted to find a church. Across the street from Bill's college was a well-dressed, conservative, somewhat traditional

church. One Sunday, Bill decided to visit that church. He walked into the sanctuary with his nose ring and wild hair. The service had already started, and so Bill walked down the aisle looking for a seat. But the church was packed, and he could not find a seat anywhere.

By now, people were a little bit uncomfortable, but no one said anything. Bill got closer to the front of the church. When he realized there were no seats left, he simply sat down in the aisle. Although this was perfectly acceptable behavior at his college fellowship group, this had never happened before in that church!

The tension in the congregation was palpable. The preacher didn't know what to do and stuttered through some of his words. About that time, an elderly man, one of the patriarchs of that church, slowly made his way down the aisle toward Bill. The man was in his eighties, had silver-gray hair, and always wore a three-piece suit. He was a godly man, elegant and dignified.

As he started walking toward Bill, everyone was saying to themselves, you can't blame him for what he's going to do. How can you expect a man of his age and of his background to understand some college kid with a nose ring, wild hair, T-shirt and jeans and no shoes, sitting there on the church floor? The older gentleman walked with a cane and so it took a long time for him to reach the young man. The church was utterly silent except for the clicking of the man's cane. All eyes were focused on him. Finally, the older gentleman reached Bill. He paused a moment, and then dropped his cane on the floor. With great difficulty, the older man lowered himself and sat down next to Bill. He shook his hand and welcomed him into the church.

I'm pleased to say that I know any number of people who would do the same thing because that is what humility looks like...that is what hospitality looks like...that dear friends, is what the Gospel looks like!

Let us pray...

Almighty and Everlasting God, we praise you for having humbly walked the long road to redemption, for having met us where we are, but not allowing us to stay there, rather inviting us to a new and abundant life in Jesus Christ our Lord. May we always be humble enough to walk with our neighbors, and hospitable enough for them to see in us the very grace and mercy of our Savior. In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.