

22nd Sunday September 1, 2013 Luke 14.1,7-14

This is a gospel of contrasts. (It might be noted that the most desirable church seat today is not the *highest*, but the one in the back.) Jesus contrasts the guest who grabs the best seat with the host who invites the blind and lame. He is contrasting arrogance with humility, selfishness with generosity. Jesus is following a long rabbinic tradition which contrasts the wise man with the fool. We find this in the very first psalm. “Blessed is the one who delights in the Lord, who is like a tree planted by the water. Not so are the wicked, not so. They are like chaff, dispersed by the wind, who will not survive judgment.”

The contrast may be too stark, for most of us are a mixture of humility and arrogance, selfishness and generosity, good and evil. The rotten apple has some good in him; the apple that looks shiny on the surface may have an internal worm. We want to be wise, and we know this means hard work. So we excuse ourselves; we postpone. As Augustine said, “give me chastity, but not quite yet.”

Traditional Christian literature has much to say about humility of heart and behavior. This includes the chapter on the steps of humility in St Benedict’s Rule. It is the second-longest of seventy-three chapters. It is both inspiring and forbidding.

The end of the chapter inspires. “When you have climbed all the steps of humility, you will arrive at the perfect love of God which casts out fear. What you once did with dread, you will now do effortlessly out of love for Christ.” But then there are the forbidding parts. Step one: “To be humble you must keep reverence for God before your eyes *always*, never forgetting God’s commands.” Step four: “you must quietly embrace suffering and endure it without seeking escape.” Step seven needs some qualification: “you must be convinced in your heart of your inferiority to all, believing with the psalmist you are a worm, scarcely human.” I for one believe that God reveals many truths in the discipline of psychology, including the importance of self-esteem. We need psychology’s insights to affirm and recover the dignity of the human person, as a preliminary to the pursuit of humility.

Does humility make you feel discouraged? There is a surprising amount of secular literature on humility. It comes in odd places. On LeadershipFreak.com (8/28/11) I found “Fifteen Ways to Tell if Someone is Arrogant or Humble.” It is meant

to teach managerial or career skills, but is profound at deeper levels. Number one: “Arrogant leaders advance their agenda by telling others what they want to hear; humble leaders tell the truth to serve the higher purpose.” Thus true humility is willing to speak up; it does not silently swallow wrongness. But to balance this, number fifteen: “Arrogance blames; humility takes responsibility.” We should not use truth as a weapon, aggressively. This is a serious temptation for the religious person. Believing I am correct, I may use my truth to condemn others, when I should set an example by applying the truth to myself.

This is hard, and we may have to start small. Jesus said, become as little children. This set me thinking about a magazine which I enjoyed in grade-school: Highlights for Children: Fun with a Purpose. I learned it is still around from another website called simple-pleasures.org (5/19/13). Highlights had regular features, such as Hidden Pictures, the Timbertoes, and Jokes (always including one knock-knock joke). But the best was Goofus and Gallant. This was an illustrated feature, with three pairs of pictures, showing two brothers. Goofus (on the left) always made the wrong choice; Gallant (on the right) always made the right one. On the school bus Goofus hogs the seat; Gallant makes room for someone to sit down. Goofus bosses his friends; Gallant asks his friends, “What do *you* want to do?” Goofus takes the last apple; Gallant shares his orange. That one is an ethical dilemma I myself have faced in my community’s kitchen—to take that last cookie or leave it for someone else. Gallant was prim and a bit goody, the classic teacher’s pet. Goofus was a bully and punk. The brothers are stereotypes, but nevertheless show the options: do I try the path of humility or take the easier way of arrogance and selfishness?

The answer seems obvious. But as simple-pleasures.org says, “The Goofus’s in our society are admired for their strength and ability to achieve. They attain positions of leadership, which they often abuse. [Certain politicians, sports and entertainment stars, and church leaders come to mind]. They are rewarded with financial wealth. Goofus’s don’t care how many heads they have to step on or how many rules they break as they climb the ladder to the top. They are manipulators who look out for Number One. Ironically, these are the members of society who often excite us; we envy their power, success, and wealth, even though we question their values and character traits.”

It is harder, and not always rewarding to be a Gallant. But, simple-pleasures.org concludes, “Each day we are presented with a variety of decision-making moments. Whether facing important or trivial matters, we possess the ability to think and feel before we act. We have the power to choose actions that will bring about positive outcomes and shape lasting relationships.”

Back to our gospel theme, “Whoever exalts self shall be humbled; whoever humbles self shall be exalted.” One detail I particularly like is that Jesus told this humility parable because he *noticed* the guests choosing places of honor. Earlier it says, when Jesus went to dine, the Pharisees *watched* him. So we have Jesus watching those who are watching him. There is a contrast between the goofus Pharisees trying to trap, and gallant Jesus being aware.

The more self-aware we are, the more humble we can be. We can let go of the need to be selfish and to blame. We can cultivate the Christ in us who gives such self-awareness. We can imitate the Christ who humbled himself by coming down to earth from his exalted place in heaven. When we fail, instead of blaming ourselves, we can find forgiveness and empowerment from Christ. We can make amends and start again. We *can* become the humble host who makes room for someone, even someone uncongenial, on our bus seat.

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