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Luke 14:1, 7-14
November 13, 2016

“The Missing Virtue”

Winston Churchill was once asked, “Doesn’t it thrill you to know that every time you make a speech, the hall is packed to overflowing?”

“It’s quite flattering,” replied Sir Winston. “But whenever I feel that way, I always remember that if, instead of making a political speech, I was being hanged, the crowd would be twice as big.”

That should keep you humble, right?

Which brings me to this morning’s text from the Gospel of Luke. Jesus is the guest at a fancy dinner. His host is a ruler. He is also a Pharisee, so I’m sure it had an A-list guest list.

If the party was held today, folks like Donald Trump would have been there, maybe Jerry Brown, and certainly one of the Kardashians.

It has that kind of guest list.

The host is a prominent man in the community. He is a leader. People look up to him. People pay attention to him.

Since he is also a Pharisee, he moved in the right circles.

On this occasion, he has invited some friends to dinner to meet the newest celebrity in Israel, the man from Nazareth, who had gained notoriety as a rabbi and as a healer.

There were even stories about miracles.

Apparently, everywhere he went, thousands of people came out to hear this itinerant preacher, Jesus.

And everyone at that event that day certainly has heard of him.

It's a nice catered affair.

After the meal, our host gets up and gives Jesus a most gracious introduction.

Then invites Jesus to say a few words. I think he probably regretted asking that.

Well, Jesus stands up and begins, "I noticed the way that you all maneuvered for seats at this table.

"You might be able to get away with that here, but let me tell you, if you are invited to a marriage feast, you better not sit down at the place of honor, cuz you never know when a more distinguished person might show up.

"And the host has to come over to you and, in front of everyone, say to you, 'Hey buddy, you need to move and give your place to this person.'

"Instead, when you are invited, sit in the back, so that when the host comes, he just might just say to you, 'Friend, come on up and sit next to me.'"

And then, just like that, Jesus ends his remarks with:

"For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled and everyone who humbles himself will be exalted."

Now in this parable we need to remember that Jesus is talking to a group of religious leaders, called Pharisees.

These Pharisees are convinced that they were God's gift to mankind.

They do everything right religiously. They tithe, go to the temple, help the poor, and follow the law.

Outwardly, they are really good. Inwardly, not so much. They lack the one thing that keeps them from truly following God:

Humility.

Humility, unfortunately, is a missing virtue many of our lives. Our nature, and our culture, tells us that we must become great and respected by others.

We are taught that true value is in people recognizing us, and seeing how wonderful we really are.

Although pride is listed as a vice in the Bible, many of us wear it as a badge of honor. We just want people to see our position, and praise us for our piety.

And when we do all that pious stuff, we expect God to reward us, right?

Well, if that's what you believe, then you are buying into something called the "Prosperity Gospel."

The "Prosperity Gospel" says that humility and sacrifice are merely a means to an end, a means to immediate and tangible rewards.

You've heard it and so have I.

“I gave God a hundred dollars and I got a thousand dollars in return.”

“We are faithful Christians and because of that, Billy made quarterback and Andrea got a full scholarship and sits first chair in the strings section.

“And we took the whole family on a magnificent vacation to Hawaii. Praise the Lord!”

Someone once told me that he didn’t understand God. “We’ve started coming to church,” he said.

“And we’ve been giving money and volunteering. But our marriage is still rocky, our kids are still unruly, and I’m still having financial trouble.”

Somewhere he had heard that humility and sacrifice are merely means to financial success and domestic harmony. Where in the world did he hear that?

That’s NOT the lesson Jesus is trying to teach here.

I don’t know if any of you have ever had the following experience, but I have. I wave a man into a long traffic line, and he has the audacity not to wave a “thank you” in return.

Or, I hold the door for an older couple to go into the grocery store, and they don’t say “thank you” either.

Both times, I’m a little offended.

I shouldn’t be though, right?

I have to remind myself that I am to be kind and generous, not for a “thank you” or for any other reward, but simply for the peace of mind knowing that I am being the person God has called me to be.

That means that we also need to remind ourselves of our motives for doing good. A good way to do that is to ask yourself:

“Would I do the good things in church I am doing if no one else knew about it?”

In other words, do you have to “tell” how you cleaned up the kitchen, taught Sunday School two Sundays in a row, gave above your pledge, what you “said” that helped somebody?

We can do a lot of good if we don’t care who gets the credit.

I love what someone once said: Humility is like underwear - essential, but indecent if it shows!

That makes humility is hard to attain - the moment we think it is ours - it is gone.

You heard about the student who was awarded a gold pin for being the humblest man in his college class, right?

It was taken away from him the next day because he wore it.

Humility also means the proper understanding of our own worth. It requires us neither to overestimate nor to underestimate our worth.

The humility that the Gospel urges upon us has nothing to do with a self-deprecation that leaves a person without proper self-esteem.

We must simply admit the truth about ourselves: we do not know everything, we do not do everything correctly, and we are all imperfect and broken.

At the same time, we also recognize that we are made in the image and likeness of God and that we are called to help build the kingdom of God with our God-given gifts.

Samuel Morse understood this.

Morse was born into a preacher's home in New England just two years after George Washington was elected the first president of the United States.

After finishing his education at Yale, he went to England to hone his painting skill.

Upon his return to America, he was recognized as a gifted artist and was soon in much demand.

Morse's first wife got sick and died while he was away from home painting in Washington, D.C. He didn't receive the news until it was too late.

In his heartbreak, he turned away from painting and began trying to develop a means of rapid communication over great distances.

This eventually led to his discovery of the telegraph.

Despite his fame and the many honors that came his way, Morse wasn't proud or boastful.

In a letter to his second wife he wrote, “The more I contemplate this great undertaking, the more I feel my own littleness, and the more I perceive the hand of God in it.

“And how He has assigned to various persons their duties, He being the great controller, all others, His honored instruments....

“Hence our dependence, first of all on God, then on each other.”

Oh and by the way, did you know that the word “humble” comes from the old English word “humus”, which literally means, ground, or earth.

So, to be humble is to be grounded, as Christ was grounded in the earth.

To walk humbly is to remember who we are, Children of the Most High God, who is the ground of our being.

And as children of God, we are to reflect the beauty of what it means to be created in the image of God, who is love.

But now comes the hard part. Having learned that we are called on to live lives of humility and sacrificial service, to whom are we to be humble and who are we to serve?

The answer, as much as we would like it to be, is not God, but is other people.

We know this from scripture, like the Last Judgment scene in the Gospel of Matthew, that humbling yourself means thinking about other people. Serving them.

You remember that story, the Judgment scene in Matthew, sometimes called “The Parable of the Sheep and the Goats.”

In it, the most significant parts of that story, are the surprises. Everybody is surprised – those that don’t see Jesus in the hungry, thirsty, sick – and ignore the them and thereby get rejected.

They thought they were shoo-ins. They thought they had “reservations” at that banquet.

What is even more significant, though, is that those who do get in are even more surprised.

It is about humility, right? They weren’t even thinking about getting into heaven. All they were thinking about was helping people in need.

Dr. Roy McClain, the former pastor of Atlanta’s First Baptist Church, said, that 99% of what we ever do about loving God, we do toward other people.

God does not, he said, need our money or our time or our compassion.

But people do. The people around us need our money, they need our time, and they need our compassion.

The truth of this narrative, from the 14th chapter of Luke’s Gospel, is that when those banquet goers give up those prominent seats, they give them up ... think about it.

They give them up to other people.

In order to fulfill God's call on their lives, those diners have to respond with and through other people.

There really is no other way. It is in our connections with and our service to others, that we find our identity as Christian people.

Remember that most of scripture, both the Old Testament and the New, is written to believers.

In the Old Testament, to those already a part of the covenant. And in the New, to the church, to people who already claimed the name and nature of Christ.

So very much of scripture is directed toward how we live our lives together with other people within the covenant and within the church.

We are supposed to live together harmoniously, in service and hospitality.

But, we serve humbly because of the commandment of God and not necessarily the goodness of other people.

There simply are no perfect people among us to be served. We are all sinners, but God loves us anyway, and that is the world in which we live.

His name is Bill. He has wild hair, wears a T-shirt with holes in it, jeans and no shoes.

This was literally his wardrobe for his entire four years of college.

He is kind of esoteric and very, very bright. He became a Christian while attending college.

Across the street from the campus is a church, the members of which are well-dressed and very conservative.

They want to develop a ministry to the students but are not sure how to go about it.

One day, Bill decides to visit that church. He walks in wearing his jeans, T-shirt, wild hair, and no shoes and starts down the center aisle looking for a place to sit.

The church is completely packed, and he can't find a seat. The members look a bit uncomfortable, but no one says anything.

Bill gets closer and closer to the pulpit, and when he realizes that there are no seats left, he just sits down on the carpet.

Although perfectly acceptable behavior at a college fellowship, this had never happened in this church before!

By now the members are really uptight; tension fills the air.

Then, from the back of the church, a deacon slowly makes his way toward Bill.

Now in his eighties, the deacon has silver-gray hair, a three-piece suit, and a pocket watch.

He's what you might call a godly man, very elegant, very dignified, very courtly.

He walks with a cane, and as he heads toward Bill all the members are 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 background to understand a college kid on the floor?”

It takes a long time for the old man to get down the aisle. All eyes are focused on him.

The church is utterly silent. The minister can’t even begin preaching until the deacon does what he has to do.

When he reaches the front, the congregation watches as he, with great difficulty, lowers himself and sits down next to Bill so he won’t be alone.

Everyone chokes up with emotion.

When the minister gains control of himself, he says, “What I’m about to preach, you will never remember.

“What you have just seen, you will never forget.”

That’s humility. Not to build ourselves up or tear someone else down. It is to sit with those who we can sit with; to stand with those who need us to stand with, and to run with those who need to run.

The beautiful part of this scripture and of the Christian experience is that we are called by God to live lives of humility and sacrificial service.

But the difficult part, is that we are called to live those lives right now, today, among the broken and damaged people whom we meet every day.

That is the difficult part. But it is also the best part!

Amen!