

“Intentional Humility” – Luke 14:1, 7-14 – September 1, 2019

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In today's lesson we find Jesus dining at the home of a Pharisee. It was the Sabbath, and just prior to our lesson, the text in Luke tells us that those who had gathered for the Sabbath meal that day at the Pharisee's home were watching Jesus closely. Perhaps they were curious about him. Probably so. Often in the New Testament, Pharisees and their friends are portrayed as the villains in the story. Just because they held positions of leadership and status in the community, didn't mean they were opposed to Jesus or his message. Many of them wanted to learn from Jesus.

Right before our passage, Jesus healed a man in their presence, and remember, because it was the Sabbath, it could be considered unlawful. So he questioned them about the legality of healing on the Sabbath versus the moral expectation of helping someone. They were all silent. I think that shows that they really were uncertain and had a willingness to be taught.

In today's scripture lesson, the Pharisee's guests began to sit down for the meal. Now Jesus began to watch them, as they had previously been observing him. He watching them choosing the best seats – each desiring to be seated closest to their host. In this particular culture, honor was highly praised and shame was to be avoided.

So Jesus shared a short parable, and because it was so similar to a proverb, they very well may have recognized it. He appealed to their sense of honor and shame – rather than being humiliated by being asked by the host to move to lower position at the table, to provide room for someone of higher status, why not save face by sitting lower down, and possibly being asked to move higher up. That was more desirable.

And then he taught his host, when you gather people together for a large meal gathering, don't invite your friends or relatives – because, again, in that culture, one dinner party was expected to be met with a return invite. Instead, instructed Jesus, treat those who are at a lower social level – the poor and the marginalized – because they can't pay you back. This is the path to blessedness.

Humility leads to blessedness. But, for many of us, humility is not natural. It is a learned trait that we generally don't come by naturally. Why not? Because many of us, especially men, have been taught by our society and culture that humility is weak. We learn that getting ahead of others, striving for ultimate success, is the more desirable goal. And the spoils of success include pride and arrogance.

But on the other side, humility is not the same as being belittled or devalued, which is also learned. Some of us have been taught, through actions, language, culture – that we are less

than or worthless, that we should be seen and not heard, that we need to stay in our place, or that we are innately deserving of abuse. This is not humility. Humility does never mean existing below your innate status as a gift and glorious child of God, one who has been created in God's very image.

I think sometimes this call to be humble is used a violence to keep people in their so-called place.

As I was doing my research and study on this week's scripture lesson, I came across this quote, "Be humble, for the worst thing in the world is of the same stuff as you; be confident, for the starts are of the same stuff as you." (Nicholai Velimirovic, quoted on <https://preachingtip.com/archives-year-c/pentecost-year-c/proper-17-year-c/>)

This is an amazing quote, capturing the intent of what humility is and is not. It reminds us that we are no better than worst that we are capable of, but also that we are no worse than the amazing and beloved creation that we are.

What humility does, is remind us that we are all created equally. In God's eyes, we are no better than the worst criminal and no worse than the most-blessed saint.

So. Hearing that statement is the easy part – perhaps we can all affirm, "yes, humanity has been created in God's image. Every single one of us." But that's where the easy-ness ends. The more difficult part is actually believing it. Especially since we have been conditioned and taught otherwise. Now, we could probably look around this room, in the midst of worship, and think okay, that statement is not so hard. Everyone one of us, each created in God's image. God loves us all, equally. When we greet each other with the peace of Christ, immediately following the reminder of our forgiven-ness – it's something that we can affirm.

It becomes harder when we imagine ourselves in other situations. When we are standing in the same room as our abuser or among those who have continually belittled us. Or when with around people who have different color skin or have a significantly different social status. Or maybe when we find ourselves standing among the people in a detainment center on the US/Mexico border. Harder still when we are in the enclave of a group of Muslim extremists who praying for violence against US citizens. And perhaps even harder when standing among the most violent murderers or child molesters in a federal prison.

We judge ourselves inferior or superior to those around us based on learned responses. We judge ourselves morally higher or lower, we latch on to our social status, and we imagine ourselves better or worse. But that ranking system we have been taught is a result of nothing more than the accident of when and where we were born.

The relative wealth or status into which we were born is reinforced and allowed to thrive in a world run by humans. Jesus however has taught that God's ideal is equality, and peace, and enough for all.

For those of us who live in comfort, and compared to a majority of the world, we have to intentionally seek out the poor and the marginalized. Humbling ourselves requires intentionality and repetition. With practice it becomes habit. And with habit we come to experience the blessedness of knowing each other as God's beloved children. Seeing beyond skin, morality, wealth, intelligence, etc.

And for those of us that have been weighed down by oppressive worldly values can know that we have worth beyond that which we have ever experienced in our lifetimes. That we are indeed beloved children of God, worthy of love.

As Jesus told his dinner companions, it is in God's realm where we will fully understand the experience of blessedness – here we have glimpses of that glorious vision – but there we will see the other, no matter who that other is – we will see each other in the loving equality of all God's children. May it be so.