

October 24, 2004
Season after Pentecost
David L. Edwards

Being a Humble People

Psalm 65 *You crown the year with your bounty; your wagon tracks overflow with richness.*

Joel 2:23-32 *You shall eat in plenty and be satisfied, and praise the name of the Lord your God, who has dealt wondrously with you.*

Luke 18:9-14 *He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt.*

This morning I want to talk about humility as perhaps the primary spiritual attitude or quality of spirit we are to cultivate as people of faith.

First, I think we need to deal with what humility is not, yet the way it has popularly been presented. Humility does not mean thinking that we are bad people and not worth a plug nickel. That is simply putting ourselves down and harboring inferiority complexes. All this does is create deep seated feelings of anger and resentment. Christianity has fostered this notion of humility with the message that we are “original sinners,” no good from birth and having nothing inherently in us that is pleasing to God. This simply doesn’t square with the biblical view that we are created by God and loved steadfastly by God who will stop at nothing to keep a covenant relationship with us in spite of how badly we might act.

Humility is not discounting our abilities and the gifts that we have to offer this world. I grew up in a home environment that was very warm and loving. And yet there was this “thing” about not drawing attention to ourselves, not “making a show” of our abilities. To be humble meant to be reticent about confidently sharing the abilities we had out of fear that we might appear to be prideful. This doesn’t square with Jesus’ command to let our light shine before others so that they might give glory to God. It doesn’t square either with Paul’s words about each of us having a gift that is essential to the whole community, and those gifts need to be called forth, named, and exercised for the ministry of God’s love in Christ.

Those notions of humility really breed a kind of perverted self-centeredness. They represent a kind of piety that is obsessed with one’s own moral appearance. They do not recognize our place within the whole of reality and the importance of seeing ourselves in relationship to everything and everyone around us. Such notions of humility keep us from occupying that unique place that each of us has within the created order of things, thus fulfilling the purpose for our lives. And that, overall, would be the better definition of humility—understanding and living fully within the whole web of life that God has created and fulfilling God’s purposes for our lives.

Humility comes from the word *humus*—ground, earth. That is a good place to start to find a truer meaning of humility. Farmers tend to be humble. Those who work the earth planting and harvesting tend to have a less separate idea of their existence. They know how interrelated their lives are with the sun, the rain, the earth, the seed, the seasons. They tend to see how life and death are both part of the one reality we call life. They also know the importance of human community, especially when it comes to work. Try to harvest a crop by yourself! It takes people working together, plus the ones who made the tractors and the tools.

These days with corporate farming displacing the small farmer, we are losing that connection, that wisdom. Our food magically appears on the grocery shelves and is thoughtlessly tossed into the microwave and wolfed down in our hurry to get on with our business.

The psalm for today is a lavish picture of God's providing for us and the whole of creation. Praise is due to God because God provides for every need in creation. God's saving movements within creation sustain every life. The rivers of water, the rains showering the earth, softening it and drawing forth its productivity. Pastures overflow, the hills dress themselves in joy, meadows with flocks and hers, valleys with grain. And I love this line: "...your wagon tracks overflow with richness." Everywhere God is—which IS everywhere—there is abundance.

Humility, then, has to do with understanding our interrelatedness with all creation. We are not separate selves existing over against the world. We are a part of everything and everything is part of us. Unfortunately we have inherited what is a basically Western, European intellectual view of things that tells us the human being is separate from the rest of reality, and, of course, superior. This notion has been at the root of the destructive patterns of living that have treated the world around us as an object to be used and abused for our own self-centered ends. Now that this dominant attitude is collapsing around us as we reap the whirlwind of environmental destruction we are being forced to discover a deeper reality and wisdom. Human beings have their unique place in creation but it is a place completely interwoven with everything else.

When we contemplate the nature world, if we look closely, we will see that it is truly our home. We are made of the earth, the water, the sun. Even our spirits are intertwined with this world. Our spirits are nourished as we live in conscious communion with the creation around us. Then we know that we are not separate from but are integrally part of that creation. Ancient peoples, those we have arrogantly called "heathen" or "primitive," have known this and lived this way. As Christians, our scriptures bear witness to this truth and wisdom. The psalm, as well as the words of the prophet Joel which we heard this morning, tells us as much. It is high time that we allowed this fundamental creational theology and spirituality to blossom fully in our spirits, expanding them in a humility that gives rise to joy and gratitude at the core of our being. Christian spirituality must be broader and deeper than individual morality and piety. It must even be broader and deeper than just human community and relationships. It needs to incorporate and express creational spirituality, our relationship to the earth and even the cosmos.

Jesus' parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector speaks of humility, also, but from a different angle. It is the issue of spiritual humility in how we regard ourselves in relationship to other people.