

September 2, 2007/Season after Pentecost/David L. Edwards

Humility and Hospitality

Luke 14:1, 7-14

*“For all who exalt themselves will be humbled,
and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”*

*The Master acts without expectation, succeeds without taking credit,
and doesn't think she is better than anyone else.* --Tao te Ching (77)

*When we touch the earth we become small, with the humility and simplicity of a young child. When we touch the Earth we become great,
like an ancient tree sending her roots deep into the earth, drinking from the source of all waters.*

--Thich Nhat Hanh

Jesus gives us two teachings about humility with regard to ourselves and hospitality with regard to others. Humility and hospitality are interrelated.

The word humility literally means “of the earth”(Fr. *humus*). Humility is a realistic understanding of ourselves in relation to life. We are “of the earth.” We are to be grounded, not living with our heads up in the clouds. When we are grounded in this realistic self-understanding, we live fruitfully and happily with ourselves, other people and the earth itself. When we let our feet get off the ground, we get ourselves into all kinds of trouble as individuals, communities, and nations. For Jesus, humility is the only right and fruitful way to live.

Jesus is invited to dinner. The Pharisees are watching to catch him offending the status quo. Jesus is watching the guests maneuver for the best seats. They are not humble. Their heads are in the clouds, seeking recognition, measuring themselves in relation to each other. When we have to see ourselves as higher, better or more “special” than others, we sow the seeds of our own unhappiness and of conflict. We reveal our insecurities as individuals or nations.

I attended a graduation ceremony at Lynchburg College years ago because a friend of ours from South Korea was receiving his diploma. The president of his university back home was a podium guest. In his introductory remarks, the L. C. president referred to the U.S. as the greatest country on earth. Why did he have to say that? Greatest according to whose standards? Millions of Americans living in poverty, without health care or adequate educational opportunities or housing would not say that. I felt embarrassed that such words would be spoken in the presence of international guests who also loved their own countries but had no compulsion to make such a statement about their homelands. If we have to be first, have the best seats, receive recognition and affirmation of others in order to feel good about ourselves, we are in trouble! It is not a sign of security and inner peace, but of insecurity and antagonism.

After watching for a while, Jesus says: When you are invited to a wedding banquet, don't take the best seat. You might be embarrassed later when the host asks you to give your seat to someone higher up on the guest list. Just take the back seat. Be grateful you have a seat and enjoy the party. You may then be surprised if the host upgrades you to a better seat. Don't promote yourself; let others promote you. In fact, let go of the desire for promotion or recognition or status. Then you will be truly free and happy. Those who exalt themselves will be humbled; those who humble themselves will be exalted.

Jesus is teaching more than social etiquette. This is a core spiritual teaching about the nature of reality. When we get caught in having to prove ourselves or achieve something so that we feel superior to others, we are riding for a fall. We are attaching our self-worth to other people and how we measure ourselves against them. If we are accepting of ourselves as we are—weaknesses, strengths, frailties, abilities, the whole mix—then we will experience being exalted. Jesus doesn't mean that humility is just another way to get attention or affirmation--“Look how humble she is!” I think Jesus means that humility enables us to live in deep contentment and acceptance, and with true power, the power of love. No competition. No winning and losing. No having to be better, stronger, or dominant over others in any way. True humility means knowing who we are and who we aren't, accepting both, and doing what we feel called to do as faithfully as we can. Isn't that true freedom? Wouldn't such a life be truly happy in the most profound sense?

Now Jesus has a word for his host. Look, when you give a dinner, don't invite your buddies or your family or just your little comfortable group. Invite those who never get invited anywhere—the poor, those with so-called disabilities, anyone who society and religion tends to exclude. Invite people who can't pay you back! Jesus is dealing with our deepest motivations. Don't do something so that you'll get something out of it. Do something because it is the right thing to do. Expect no accolades, no results, no anything. If you live that way, you WILL get a reward at the resurrection of the dead. Jesus does speak of getting something out of it, but not in terms of this life, of our self-importance, or what will get us ahead in society or the church or anywhere else.

You will be rewarded or repaid at the resurrection of the dead. This has to do with ultimate things, with ultimate meaning. The reward--and we need not shy away from that word--of living a life in humility and hospitality is that we are in touch with the deepest meaning of life. We are liberated from the incessant, misery-filled quest for recognition or approval or affirmation. We are true human beings, the way God made us to be. I think that the root of so many of our personal and social problems is this insecurity that drives us to be better than others or to be the most powerful, attractive, successful or simply to be right over against others we consider wrong. It drives us into addiction to substances and relationships. It leads us to relate to others only for what we can get out of them—approval, acceptance, affirmation, and the meeting of our emotional and psychological desires. Jesus here and in many other places points us to the truly successful way of living, the way of being free from distinctions, judgments, and attachments, the way that frees us to be truly loving human beings. Human—of the earth—humble.

Kaye and I met a remarkable woman in Germany over twenty years ago. Her name was Leni Immer. Her father Karl Immer was pastor of the church in Barmen that hosted the Barmen Conference in 1934. The “Barmen Declaration” opposing the Nazification of the church was issued at this meeting of pastors and theologians. Leni became a pastor herself, and remained active in the issues that grew out of the Hitler era. She visited Lynchburg and I invited her to speak at First Christian Church. Something she said that morning has stuck with me ever since. Out of the experience of the Hitler time, she spoke of our need to “make ourselves small so that others have room to breathe.” Hitler’s Germany was a nightmare of human beings making themselves big, powerful, greatest, and it resulted in the mass murder and dehumanizing of many people labeled as inferior. By making ourselves small, Leni did not mean belittling ourselves or having poor self-images. She wasn’t talking about becoming psychologically unhealthy. She was talking about what Jesus talked about. Humility. Seeing ourselves in the whole context of life, not needing to exclude, judge or conquer others. When we make ourselves small in this way, then others have room to breathe, room to be who they are. This is true hospitality.

Humility and hospitality are interrelated. When we live in humility, we become empty of those attitudes and behaviors that crowd others out, that suffocate them. When we are humble in this way, we are hospitable toward others. Hospitality in Jesus’ view is being open to others without expectation of what they can give us, what they can do for us, whether or not they will somehow enhance our lives. This can mean also not using our hospitality toward those who are poor or otherwise on the margins of society to enhance our self-image as “good Christians.”

What Jesus teaches here may seem like a tall order. All of us are caught in the attitudes Jesus observed in those vying for the best seats. We all have some tendency to relate to others so that we get something in return. It’s the way we have been conditioned. We all struggle with fears and insecurities. What can help us is awareness. Awareness is simply observing ourselves. We have this wonderful capacity to be aware of our own inner life and our own actions, to observe and thus to understand ourselves. And with understanding comes change. This is the work of what we call the inward journey. It is the attention that we give to our own lives as persons of faith, those who are following Jesus. Jesus simply observed people’s attitudes and behaviors, and then tried to make them aware of them. He said, Look, this is what you are doing and how you are acting. Do you realize that? Here is another way, a better way, a way that is in harmony with God and your true nature.

Jesus helps us live with awareness. We can watch ourselves, not like the Pharisees, ready to judge and condemn ourselves. We can observe ourselves so that we become aware of the ways we are attached to getting recognition or affirmation from others. We can become aware of the ways we relate to others in order to enhance our self-esteem. We can also become aware of how we exclude those who cannot give us anything, who cannot improve our standing or feed our hungry egos. It is simply observing, becoming aware. As we grow in understanding and awareness, change happens. We don’t have to work at it. It just happens as our awareness grows, as we drop our attachments to recognition, affirmation, and the ways we relate to others in order to get what we want. This is the work of our inward journey—growth in self-awareness and self-understanding in light of our relationship with God and other people.

So there is a great message of freedom in Jesus’ teachings. We can become free with regard to ourselves, more content with who we are and who we are not. And we become free with regard to others, open and welcoming toward those who we would otherwise exclude and avoid. As we grow in humility, we grow in hospitality. We grow in our capacity for joy and love.