

August 29, 2010/Season after Pentecost/David L. Edwards

More Than Good Manners

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, one about humility with regard to ourselves, one about hospitality with regard to others. When we reflect deeply on these dinnertime stories, we see that Jesus is talking about far more than good manners. He is talking about the quality of our lives as human beings.

The word humility literally means “of the earth”(Fr. *humus*). I don't think humility is a moral virtue that we adopt. It is a realistic understanding of ourselves in relation to all of life. We are “of the earth.” We are to be grounded, not floating somewhere up in the clouds. When we are grounded in realistic self-understanding, we live fruitfully and happily with ourselves, other people and the earth as God's good creation. 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 fruitful way to live. It is the seedbed of peace, justice, and love.

Jesus attends a dinner hosted by a prominent Pharisee. The Pharisees are watching Jesus, hoping to catch him offending official religion. Jesus is watching in order to learn, get insight, and to teach others. He observes the guests jockeying for the prime seats, close to the host's table or next to someone successful or powerful. They are caught in the game of recognition, status, and being superior to someone else.

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 when the host asks you to give your seat to someone higher up on the guest list. 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 higher place. 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. You won't care where you sit. If you are at the head table, you are happy and content. If you are way back by the kitchen, you are happy and content. Even if you don't get an invitation, it won't affect your peace, happiness, and contentment one bit.

Jesus is not just talking about social etiquette. This is a core spiritual teaching about the nature of reality. When we get caught in having to have attention or achieve something in order to feel good about ourselves, we are riding for a fall. We are attaching our self-worth to how other people regard us. 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--Maybe if I am humble enough, I'll get some attention, I'll get a better seat! No. 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 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 and profoundly happy, free of fear, anxiousness, and grasping?

On Friday I hiked up Sharp Top at the Peaks of Otter. Due to some back and hip issues, I prepared in myself a different attitude for the hike. I took it slowly, walking until I began to strain, then taking a rest. I rested seven or eight times on the way up. As several people passed me sitting on this or that rock, I spoke a greeting and never once thought, "Oh, they are going to get there ahead of me!" When I reached the top where the trail goes left to the high summit and right to the lower summit, I checked my watch. I was surprised to discover that it had taken me exactly the same amount of time as when I had hiked the trail huffing and puffing and pushing myself. I arrived at the top without exhaustion, having enjoyed the whole journey.

However, a young man had passed me just below the top, and veered off to the right, toward Buzzards Roost, the lower summit. That's where I was headed. I was looking forward to sitting on those massive boulders

in solitude, enjoying the expansive view of Bedford County and the Parkway as it winds south toward Roanoke. I felt irritation and tension rising in me; I was losing the peace and contentment I had enjoyed on the way up. I looked around. There was a large boulder on my right. So I climbed up on it, and sat with my back against another rock. I would just wait until that fellow came back down the trail. Then I could achieve my goal.

I took in the scene around me. Atop the boulder, I discovered myself lifted into the surrounding trees. Their limbs formed a green enclosure around me, but opened up into the sky. The wind was blowing with an autumn coolness, and the sun was shining pale through the light cloud cover. I felt the solidity of the mountain beneath me. I had completely forgotten about reaching my planned goal. My enjoyment of the summit did not depend on having the "best seat". I had taken what seemed at first to be the "lower seat", but I was completely happy, content, and at peace. I think that is what Jesus was getting at. Dropping our attachments to recognition, status, gaining, being the best and having the best, we come to a place of utter peacefulness, contentment, and openness. We see through the games and our participation in them. And when we see through something in ourselves, it loses its hold on us. We are free.

If we are humble in the sense Jesus means, content with whoever and wherever we are, then we become hospitable people. We are open to others, whoever they may be. So Jesus has a word for his host. Look, when you give a dinner, don't invite those who can give you something in return. Drop your schemes and manipulations. Invite those who never get invited, those excluded by society and religion. Invite people who can't improve your social status and power. 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 righteous. You will get something out of it, but not in terms of material life, or self-importance, or getting ahead in society or the church or anywhere else.

This has to do with ultimate things, with ultimate meaning. The reward of living in humility and hospitality is that we are in touch with the truest meaning of life. It is what Jesus called the way of eternal life. Not life after death, but fullness of life now AND forever. We are liberated from the incessant, misery-filled quest for recognition or approval or power. We are true human beings, the way God made us to be. 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 to be right over against those we consider wrong. It leads us to relate to others only for what we can get out of them—approval, acceptance, affirmation, the meeting of our emotional and psychological desires. And it leads to violence, as the current anti-Muslim fear and anger show. Religions jostling each other for the best seat, to be the best and most powerful. How misguided is that! Jesus points us to the truly successful way of living, the way of being free from such attachments and obsessions, the way that frees us to be truly loving human beings.

Kaye and I attended a graduation ceremony at Lynchburg College years ago when a friend of ours from South Korea was receiving his diploma. The president of his university back home was a podium guest. There was also a guest seated there who was from a university in what was then East Germany. 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? The millions of Americans living in poverty, without health care or adequate educational opportunities or housing, would not agree with that. Our history of genocide against Africans during slavery and Native Americans during conquest is not evidence of greatness. 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 strength, but of insecurity and defensiveness. We only cause problems for ourselves and others.

In the 1980s, Kaye and I had the opportunity to travel in Germany. There we met a remarkable woman. Her name is Leni Immer. Her father Karl Immer had been pastor of the church 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 was able to visit 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 dominate 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.

All of us get caught in the habits of thinking and acting Jesus observed that day. 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 and our participation in life, the way Jesus simply observed. We have this wonderful capacity to be aware of our own inner life and our own actions, to come to deeper understanding of 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 tried to help them become aware. 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.

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.