

The Quality of Humility

Time after Pentecost
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Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Proverbs 25:6-7; Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16; Luke 14:1, 7-14

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

O Lord, it is indeed hard to be humble. Nearly a century ago, British poet Edith Sitwell expressed the predicament perfectly in these words: *I have often wished I had time to cultivate modesty . . . But I am too busy thinking about myself.* Well, yes, that's the problem. We're **always** thinking about ourselves. Isn't that ultimately the root of all our sins? All the ways we go wrong? We're busy thinking, concentrating, focusing on ourselves!

So we have at least two lessons today which soundly put us back in our place, and remind us not to be thinking so much of and about ourselves. The first lesson is two simple verses from Proverbs, a book considered Wisdom literature in Jewish scripture. And it does give wise advice, does it not? If you're at a dinner, don't head right up to the seats of honor, in case those are reserved for someone greater than you, and you are shamed by being asked to move back down to a lesser seat. See, in the Middle East, issues of honor and shame in social context are paramount—it was that way at the time these wisdom sayings were being collected, as well as at the time of the earthly Jesus. One was mortified to be shamed in front of one's peers or in front of people of any other status, for that matter. This saying reminds people that if you don't want to make a complete fool of yourself, choose a lesser seat, and—surprise, surprise!—you might just be called up higher.

I can't help but think of all those actors and actresses nominated for an Oscar, who wait in their Armani tux or Versace gown, eloquent acceptance speech in sweaty hand, ready to leap to their feet and the stage, only to be disappointed when another nominee's name is called. In private, they rip up those would-be acceptance speeches and toss them away, probably glad they didn't leap prematurely, and thus embarrass themselves.

Jesus, in Luke's Gospel, gives a similar wise teaching. Certainly he—and the dinner guests with whom he ate—knew of this Proverbs passage. Of course, Jesus expands the teaching in his own inimitable style. The other dinner guests, and the Pharisee of the synagogue who was the dinner host were listening to him carefully, watching him closely, Luke tells us. (He had, after all, been doing some questionable things in their sight, such as healing people on the Sabbath, which was not following Torah laws.) Jesus reiterates this Old Testament wisdom saying, but adds another sentence: *For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.*

Then Jesus turns attention to the host by offering more wisdom. A host of a banquet shouldn't be about the task of inviting only those who are "important" or "worthy" and will then surely be able to reciprocate by inviting the host to **their** home. That kind of *quid pro quo* is the stuff that runs most social networking, doesn't it? You invite the neighbors to dinner? You figure that the

next time around, they'll invite you. That sounds great. We spend a little, we get something in return. When I studied this parable about the dinner host, I remembered an uncle of mine who had a way of dealing with small businesses in our hometown that, on the surface, appeared to be quite accommodating and helpful. Actually, it was self-serving. Let me explain. Say my uncle needed to have a new faucet installed. He would contact a local plumber, have the needed services rendered, then offer to pay the plumber cash "under the table." You know, without paying taxes. (I'm not here to debate the issue of taxes, or our government's seeming inability to use our money wisely. That's not the point here.) The point is my uncle would pay less for the service he wanted, which served him well. The plumber didn't have to do report the money he received or send the government anything either, so he was pleased. And most important of all, my uncle could pretty much guarantee that the next time he needed his faucet repaired the plumber would be more than happy to drop whatever it was he was doing (including other people's faucets) and cater to my uncle. Thus the reciprocity game goes on. I'll scratch your back if you scratch mine . . . That's what Jesus witnessed as the way the world worked. To which Jesus responds: No! If you're going to have a banquet full of food and fellowship, then have your guests be the poor and the outcast—the ones who really need the food and fellowship, and can't possibly repay your kindness. Apparently humility is needed not only in guests, but in hosts. Apparently Jesus realized just how much time we spend thinking about ourselves.

Of course, the irony is that, in our continual focusing on ourselves, our wants and needs, our position in society, we hear these wisdom sayings about humility and promptly twist them around to our own advantage. Suddenly we have a way of acting and being that will assure us that, eventually we **will** go to the higher seats, we **will** receive honor, we **will** look good. Suddenly, these texts can be wrongly interpreted like a Dale Carnegie course—remember his best-selling book? It was called *How to Win Friends and Influence People*. If you want to be successful, if you want to look good, just **act** like you're humble. Adopt the **air** of humility. Give the **appearance** of modesty. People will be impressed, and you will be raised up higher in their estimation, raised up in your status. Lower yourself in order to elevate yourself.

This week, NFL Quarterback Michael Vick pleaded guilty to charges of unlawful activities regarding dog-fighting. Some of the charges include running an interstate dog-fighting operation, and the execution of animals. He pleaded guilty, and then apologized for his "immaturity," which is quite a lovely euphemism for "crime" or "sin" or "a series of lies" or "brutality" or whatever other words might fit more accurately. I suppose he looked humbled in that courtroom, and it may well be he is truly remorseful. Or not.

But what caught my attention was the front page of the Patriot-News Sports section on Tuesday. It was the photo of Michael Vick standing up in court, and the headline was a quote of his: "I will redeem myself. I have to."

He can't redeem himself. He can't go walking up to the seat of honor and expect to sit down on it. Nor can he put on an air of humility, in the hopes that it will propel him higher, and maybe even back to some semblance of the status he once had. Oh, I'm not saying Michael Vick cannot do some **good** in the years ahead. There's much good he can do. He can use some of his previously-earned monies (once the lawyer fees are paid) to lobby for an end to the horrible sport of animal-fighting, perhaps helping rescue animals already trapped in the system. He can hit the

lecture circuit (once his prison term is over) and talk honestly with young boys who idolize these athletes, talk to them about how to be successful while at the same time holding onto values that truly lead to abundant life in community. He can play football again (if he can keep the workout regimen during an incarceration) and use the tremendous athletic gifts God gave him that he tossed away through his participation in a “sport” (I use that term loosely) that placed some of God’s beautiful creatures in terrible, hopeless situations. Vick can do all those good things, and I hope he does.

But he can’t redeem himself. None of us can do that for ourselves. Vick can’t move up to the higher seat of honor. It is not his to grant that for himself. Even remorse and repentance, needful as they are sometimes, do not in and of themselves redeem a person, and restore them to the place they once belonged.

Only God has the power to redeem. To make new and whole what has been broken. To bring us back to the place in his kingdom where we belong. And until we realize that, we’ll continue to be full of ourselves, and when we’re full of ourselves, there’s no room in us for God. You see, when Jesus said “*For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted,*” he wasn’t referring to the worldly system of ladder-climbing. He was referring to the exalting that God does, the raising up that God does for his children. He was referring to the fact that we are low on the divine ladder, low through “immaturities,” our sins, our questionable motives, our self-serving ways. Ultimately, it is only God who can move us up that ladder in his sight, lifting us up to be his faithful, right-living people again. And God lifts us up, does he not? You and I constantly benefit from and are lifted up here by God’s amazing words of love and forgiveness that wash over us, the nourishment of his meal that strengthens us, the gifts of His Spirit that guide us. Such lifting up is only made possible as Jesus Christ assumes our low position on the ladder **with** us. Hey—that’s the cross. That’s Jesus’ own genuine humility and servanthood. And there’s no journey to the seats of honor without going through his cross. Jesus, having humbled himself unto death, is then raised up to the right hand of God, assumes his place as Lord and King of all creation . . . and we who believe in him, trust in him, rely on him, discover he is Lord and King over **us**, and brother to us . . . and **savior** for us, as his new life brings the promise and potential of our own. **AMEN.**