

"Humility"

Time after Pentecost – Lectionary 22
The Reverend Nancy R. Easton

Sunday, August 29, 2010
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

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

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

Four of us got out of Whitaker Center in downtown Harrisburg alive. Considering we began with five people, I guess that wasn't bad.

Let me explain. The Titanic Exhibit has been at Whitaker Center in Harrisburg for the last few months, and historical artifacts from the sunken ocean liner can still be seen through next Sunday. My husband and I took our kids to see this exhibit. Upon entrance we were given a "boarding pass" with the name of a person who rode on its maiden voyage. The pass listed whether they were 1st, 2nd, or 3rd class passengers. Near the end of the exhibit you checked a long roster list of 1st, 2nd, and 3rd class passengers to find your person's name and see if you survived.

Four of us got out alive. Our son Matthew did not. Now, all of us had 1st class passenger boarding passes, but Matthew's person nevertheless did not survive. Still, that wasn't bad—four out of five.

For had all of us been 3rd class passengers, the outcome might have been different. To put it in percentage terms, 60% of the 1st class passengers survived the sinking of the Titanic. Only 24% of the 3rd class passengers survived. Woe to you if you were 3rd class.

Some claim 3rd class passengers were barred from accessing the boat deck, where people could board lifeboats. There may indeed have been some gates preventing movement from 3rd class accommodations to other decks, but those were mainly to prevent transmission of disease. Many 3rd class passengers were immigrants coming to America, and they were required to undergo a health inspection when they reached Ellis Island. But the reality is that after the ship hit the iceberg, the crew of the Titanic was slow to respond to the crisis, and slower still to announce evacuations. By the time many 3rd class passengers realized how desperate the situation was, it was too late and the lifeboats were already launched. Status, in this case, was a matter of life and death.

Now, in the culture of Palestine at the time of Jesus' earthly ministry, status was also important, though not necessarily a matter of life and death. How high you stood in social circles impacted your daily life. 1st class passenger, so to speak, in society? A high social status guaranteed you were sought after, invited to the most important community events, and given the best seat. And everyone knew that. 2nd or 3rd class passenger, so to speak, in that society? Well, you knew your place, too. If you did somehow manage to wrangle an invitation to a banquet, you knew where to sit...and where not to sit. Or you should have known. The one thing no

one wanted was to be told, "Uh, excuse me. You're in the wrong seat. You don't belong here. You need to go and sit over there."

Maybe status back then was a matter of life and death. After all, humiliation could be a fate worse than death. When you and I are really embarrassed, we pretty much just want a hole to open up in the ground and swallow us, right then and there. Well, back then, honor and reputation were everything. Consider our first lesson from Proverbs. No wonder the book of Proverbs in the Bible is described as a collection of **wisdom** sayings. The writer of those two little verses we heard today was so smart: *Do not put yourself forward in the king's presence or stand in the place of the great; for it is better to be told, "Come up here," than to be put lower in the presence of a noble.*

And no wonder Jesus quotes this wisdom saying in our Gospel story today. He's been invited to a banquet, and as a keen observer of human behavior, Jesus is busy watching people seat themselves. Everyone's jockeying for positions: Trying to get the best seat, place themselves next to someone influential, be noticed by others. But the last thing they want is to be humiliated when someone informs them they're sitting in a seat reserved for a person of higher social standing. Jesus, wise teacher that he is, offers that sound advice from Proverbs, reminding those at the banquet that in choosing the lower seat, they might be invited to take up a higher seat. He teaches that humility has its own reward—the possibility of being exalted.

Note I am using the word *humility* here, and not *humiliation*. There's a difference, even though they come from the same root word: *Humus*. Earth. The stuff that the first chapters in the Bible, way back in the book of Genesis, say we're made of. God created us out of the dust of the earth—*humus*—and breathed into us life. And God saw that all he had made—earth, stars, and every living creature, including the human—was good. Our present-day sensibilities view the word *humiliation* and immediately think of being degraded and looked down upon by others who consider themselves better. That word rightly takes on a negative connotation. Ah, but to be *humble*, to possess *humility* is more about understanding that God made us, that we are his creation, and beloved at that. To be humble is to know at last who we are. And to know whose we are. And to know who else stands on level ground beside us, neither superior nor inferior to us. And then to be secure in that knowledge.

Jan Richardson, author, artist and pastor, wrote about this text, and I found her words so helpful. She wrote, "*Humility does not only prevent us from seeing ourselves as more deserving or graced or better than another. It compels us also to recognize that we are no less deserving or graced than another...Humility draws us into mutual relation in which we allow no abuse, no demeaning, no diminishment of others or of ourselves.*"

Which is precisely where Jesus takes us in his teaching here in Luke. Jesus doesn't quote Proverbs just to keep folks from making an embarrassing social gaffe. Jesus takes that understanding about who we are, all of us—created out of *humus* by

God—to the next logical step. And that's about who gets invited to the party. He questions the host of the banquet about the guest list, declaring that he should have invited those from lower social circles where a reciprocal invitation could never occur. In other words, why invite only those who can return the favor? Why invite those of high status—except that it serves to make the host **look** good to have such an awesome list of guests at his party, and it pretty much guarantees he'll be invited to similar events in return. Which is not humility, that's for certain. Instead, says Jesus, the host should invite the poor and the suffering and the outcast, those who cannot repay or reciprocate or massage the host's precious reputation. **That** would be humility, for the host would be acting out his kinship he has with all the people God created. It would be the host's acknowledging other human beings with empathy and understanding, no matter what their status or life situation. And the host of that banquet, should he invite the poor and the suffering and the outcast, would be exalting them as he seats them at his table. Which is what Jesus said will happen--the humble will find themselves exalted.

Jesus knows of what he speaks. Jesus embodied humility. Jesus modeled living the human life as God created it to be: Caring for and giving to others, out of love for God and God's people. He aligned himself with the poor and the suffering and the outcast. He did not reach out to grasp fame or power, but ate with sinners and died a criminal's death. Yet, upon his resurrection, Jesus was exalted to the right hand of God as Lord of all. And our Risen and Ascended Lord continues to extend an invitation to us to be guests at his table. Humble, we suddenly find ourselves exalted in his presence.

The earliest followers of Jesus Christ understood this and reminded each other about the nature of humility. We read it in our second lesson today, from the letter to the Hebrews: *Let mutual love continue...Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers...Remember those who are in prison...Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have ...*

Scripture's words this day are wise counsel for you and me. The Church—Christ's people in every place—is to feed the hungry and shelter the homeless and visit the prisoner and heal the broken and welcome the stranger and pray for the sick and love one another. To do such things in Christ's name is to act with humility. And in these humble ways, you and I can exalt those around us, taking 3rd class passengers and making them 1st class in our eyes, seating them at our table of fellowship. Where they always belonged. **AMEN.**

Copyright © 2010, Nancy R. Easton. All rights reserved.