

Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, Lena, IL - 28 August 2022
Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost - Year C - Lectionary 22

1st Reading: *Proverbs 25:6-7*

Psalm: 112

2nd Reading: *Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16*

Gospel: *Luke 14:1, 7-14*

Sermon - *Vicar Thomas J. Mosbø*

In the name of the Father, ✠ and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I've never taken an Assertiveness Training Course. I don't know about the rest of you. And I don't want to criticise such courses, especially since I can't really say what they teach in them. But the idea that we should learn to be more assertive strikes me as rather telling about our whole society. We are encouraged to "look after number 1", to be aggressive in order to get better jobs, earn more money, advance to the top, and to let everyone know that we are the best.

And yet, what we hear from all of our readings this morning, and especially from Jesus in our Gospel, is quite different. The Proverbs we heard, and Jesus quoting those proverbs, tell us that rather than being aggressive or assertive, we ought to be humble, and not to seek our own honour.

"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 perhaps we can all remember a time when we were embarrassingly "put in our place" when we thought that some particular distinction or merit was for us, when it turned out to be for someone else. And we were humiliated.

But is Jesus suggesting that instead of asserting ourselves, we should humiliate ourselves deliberately, choosing the lowest seat at a banquet, just so that the host will tell us to take a more distinguished place? Is he telling us that we should grovel and ingratiate ourselves to others so that they will say, "Oh, no. You're really a much better person than that"? Is it just a trick we should play, using reverse psychology so that we will get what we want in the end anyway? Well, of course not.

Remember Uriah Heep, from Charles Dicken's novel *David Copperfield*? He bowed and scraped, wrung his hands, and went on about how "umble" he was, while all the time he was plotting and scheming to get the better of those around him. But it is not such false humility that Jesus is speaking about, but honest humility about who we are, especially in relation to others.

Do you know where the word "humility" comes from? It comes from the Latin word "humus", dirt, soil, the same rich humus soil that we enjoy here in the Midwest that makes us the breadbasket for the world. But that doesn't mean that those who are humble are dirty, it means that they are grounded, people of the earth. Indeed, the word "human" also comes from "humus", just as in Hebrew the name "Adam" also means someone from the earth, "adamah".

Farmers, more than anyone else, are people of the soil, truly humble. They know who they are, and they know that it is their place to till the soil, tend the earth, for the good of everyone. I only need to think of my father working hard on our farm to remember what being truly humble is all about. Everything he did was for the good of others, so that they could eat, so that our family could have shelter and clothing. And if he ever went to a banquet, he would not assume that it was being given in his honour.

So that is the central characteristic that Jesus is talking about when he says that we should be humble - simply thinking about others and doing what is good for them - giving honour to others, not by falsely demeaning ourselves, but by recognising what is good in others, valuing and appreciating them, instead of taking whatever we can get for ourselves.

And in the whole history of our Christian church, nearly everyone agrees that one particular person stands out as being the most perfect example of such humility - Saint Francis of Assisi, one of our most favourite saints. Francis began life as the son of a rich cloth merchant. But when he heard the voice of God calling him, he gave up all his riches, let go of all the opulent garments his father had dressed him in, and gave them to the poor, so that they, too, could be dressed warmly. Instead, he chose to wear a simple robe. And everywhere he went, if he saw anyone wearing a worse robe than he himself had, he would run up to that person and immediately offer to trade his better one for the worse one. Seeing the happiness of the other person receiving even a slightly better garment than they had had before filled Francis with joy.

Coral and I have been to Assisi, and have seen the Basilica of Saint Francis, built in his honour by the people of Assisi, who loved him, and after his death paid him the respect he would never have accepted in his lifetime. And in addition to his tomb, the Basilica contains a little museum, and there on display is the last and shabbiest robe Saint Francis actually wore - tattered, covered in patches, full of holes. [If you Google “the robe of Saint Francis of Assisi”, you can see a photo of it.] Francis didn’t wear this robe to prove how humble and holy he was, but so that others might always have something better for themselves to wear.

And so this is what Jesus is asking of us - not to make ourselves the poorest people possible - but simply to do good for others so that they have good warm clothing, nourishing food, and respect. We don’t need to go to quite the extreme that Francis did - God called him to a very specific ministry - but we can love and care for each other in whatever way God asks of us.

So Jesus is not asking us to do this because it will show how good and holy we really are, but for the sake of those to whom we do good. Jesus himself, of course, did good for all those he met - healing the sick, helping the poor, and teaching his disciples and us. And ultimately, he “humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross”, Paul tells us in Philippians.

And “Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name.” He didn’t die on the cross just so that he would be honoured and exalted, he died there for us. But because he did so, he is honoured by God and by us.

So here, as elsewhere, Jesus is not giving us orders that we had better carry out. Rather he is telling us what God is like, what he himself is like - the one who gives everything for the sake of others.

All he asks, then, is for us to follow his example, do good for others and respect them. The author of Hebrews [who again, I think was Barnabas, Paul’s friend] gives us some specific concrete ways that we can do this - “Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it. Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them; those who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured. Keep your lives free from the love of money, and be content with what you have. Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.”

And we do these things not because we will get a reward for doing them, but because God has already done all this for us - “In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another”, as John tells us in his first letter. [I warned you I like to quote I John.]

This is what it's all about. This is the essence of everything we read in the Gospels, and indeed, in the whole New Testament. God loved us and sent his Son for us, so we can now love one another. So, as we come to one of the best banquets in the whole world, a Lutheran pot luck, we honour each other with the food we bring to each other, and we honour God in fellowship with each other.

“Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever. Through him, then, let us continually offer a sacrifice of praise to God” in our love for him and for one another.

Amen!

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Robe of Saint Francis on display in the Basilica in Assisi