

Church of the Crossroads  
Twenty-second Sunday in Ordinary Time  
September 2, 2007  
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## TAKING THE LOWER PLACE

Jeremiah 2:7–13  
Luke 14:1, 7–14

The virtue of humility has been the subject of much humor. We could begin with William Sloane Coffin who once said that those “who make a virtue out of being virtuous are like giraffes: lofty up front but dragging a bit in the behind.” Then, there is the virtue of humility itself.

How about the Mac Davis song:

O Lord, it's hard to be humble  
when you're perfect in every way.  
I can't wait to look in the mirror  
'cuz I get better looking each day.

To know me is to love me;  
I must be a hell of a man.  
O Lord, it's hard to be humble  
but I'm doing the best that I can.

Or how about the person who said, “God gave me the humility to accept my greatness.” (that came from Gloria Ganibi) Or, the person who said, “I'm not humble by nature, but I'm working at it.”

Then, of course, a so-called humility taken to extreme can turn a person into a doormat, and that has disastrous consequences.

This morning, I want to do my best to redeem humility as a human quality, because I believe that it can lead to extraordinary outcomes for us as individuals and as a community. For the Christian, the kind of humility I have in mind is embodied in the life and ministry of Jesus the Christ,

who, though he was in the form of God,  
did not regard equality with God  
as something to be exploited,

but emptied himself  
 being born in human likeness.  
 And being found in human form,  
 he humbled himself  
 and became obedient to the point of death—  
 even death on a cross.

—Philippians 2:6–8

In this poetic passage, two words are brought together—*human* and *humble*. One might say that to be truly human is to be humble. The human is not one who grasps for equality with God, not one who is above others or even the creation itself. To be human is not to be *above* but to be *with*. This defines humility in the best sense of the word. Humility issues forth in solidarity, the capacity of human beings to identify themselves with the things of the earth, and with others in the human community. This kind of humility is embodied in the life and ministry of Jesus. In choosing to be human Jesus identifies himself with us. He expresses his solidarity with us. Therefore, he becomes a savior with whom we can identify.

There is something in the human being, however, that works against this. It is called *hubris*—pride. We want to be above others, better than others, in control, masters instead of servants. Why is this? Calvinists would call it original sin, and they may not be far off the mark. Others would blame it on the need of the ego to assert itself. However we want to explain it, who can deny that there is something in the human character that compels us to place ourselves *above* others and *above* the creation rather than *with* others and the things of the earth?

The scripture readings today are instructive. In the passage from Jeremiah, God’s complaint against Israel is that it has forgotten its place in the scheme of things. Israel, by the grace of God, has been freed from bondage and given a land to live in, but Israel now lives and acts as if it is in charge. It has changed its gods to suit its own desires, and has made cisterns for itself, cisterns that can hold no water. A judgment is therefore in place.

The judgment can be described by the saying quoted by Luke the Gospel writer: “For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.” (Luke 14:11) This is an explanation added to that little parable of Jesus about the guests choosing a place at a dinner party. Do not choose a higher place at the banquet table,

says Jesus. You may well be asked to step down if someone more important shows up, all to your embarrassment. Better to choose the lower place at the table, advises Jesus. You may then be asked to move higher.

Humility has to do with taking the lower place, a choice that goes against our human inclination and desire to take a higher place in the scheme of things. Let's just be content to be human. Again, the outcome will be the gift of human solidarity. No wonder the little parable about choosing places at a banquet is quickly followed by the instruction to those who give a luncheon or a dinner:

do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed. . . (Luke 14:12b–14a)

The test of human solidarity is our relationship to the poor, the lame and the blind. Humility is the path.

The refusal to take the lower place, thus keeping us apart from our own humanity and apart from the human community, has far reaching consequences, not only for ourselves and our church community, but also the world beyond the church. This, I would venture, is one of the truths of the Gospel. It is a truth that confronts us daily. We live in a nation that has chosen to take a higher place in the scheme of things. Our nation has chosen to be an empire, and we are now beginning to see the consequences. Saddled with the war debt that has resulted from America's desire to be in control, the poor of our own nation, not to speak of the poor throughout the world, are being left behind. Legislation that would provide health insurance for the uninsured children of our nation is vetoed by the president, because, as he claimed, it would not be a good thing to make the children dependent upon the government. You, I am sure, can provide other examples of the absence of human solidarity in our land. It may well arise from an inability to take the lower place and identify ourselves with those who find themselves in need in a land of plenty.

In that little parable told by Jesus, I am once again reminded of the power of the Gospel to render life more whole and humane. Included in the July issue of *Harper's Magazine* is a fascinating dialogue between Nicolas

Sarkozy, the newly elected president of France and Michael Onfray, an avowed atheist and author of thirty-two books, including *Atheist Manifesto*. In the dialogue, President Sarkozy spoke of his religious faith. He said that he is not a regular churchgoer, but that he does believe, hope, and doubt. “Ever since man has had knowledge of his destiny,” he said, “he has asked himself fundamental questions. Why were we born? Where are we going? Does life open to nothingness?” Michael Onfray responded with these words,

So religion is there to reassure man, to pacify him in the face of death? I think you’re right: God is a fiction invented by men so as not to confront the reality of their condition. There’s hope and sense in philosophical research, whereas what religion offers is foolish.

—*Harper’s*, July 2007, p.22.

Onfray has a point. Much of religion, including much of Christianity, we have to admit, has indeed become a means by which we human beings are pacified in the face of death and also a way by which we can refuse to confront the reality of our human condition.

At the same time, Christian faith can be a way by which we can ask ourselves those fundamental questions. Why were we born? Where are we going? Does life open to nothingness? Contrary to Michael Onfray’s assertion, Christian faith can be a way by which we can confront the reality of our lives. Not only that, but holding fast to the faith and witness of Jesus can also assist us to take the lower place, and thus claim our true humanity.

Jesus never failed to confront our human tendency to overreach our human boundaries in our desire to be more than we were created to be. At the same time, he shows us that in humility we can indeed take the lower place and become the loving human beings we were indeed created to be, human beings living not above others or above the earth, but in solidarity with all. Thanks be to God.