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Humility
Luke 14: 1, 7-11
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On the cover of this weeks **Time** magazine, the eyes of an old woman stare out in depth and sadness and pain; haunting eyes, really. Her wrinkled face betrays the years of hardship she has encountered and endured, and the incredible sacrifice. And the cross resting on her shoulder is a witness to the world that she does her work, not for herself or any kind of personal glory, but for the sake of the Crucified Christ who she finds in the broken and dying bodies of those to whom she ministers in the slums of Calcutta.

The woman, of course, is Mother Teresa and it is in those eyes that you can see a determination to carry out her divine calling, even when she felt utterly abandoned by the God in whom she trusted. The article in **Time** has comments on excerpts from an upcoming book, a collection of personal letters of Teresa which describe her spiritual agony and feelings of God-forsakenness for 50 years. I found the article moving and troubling and fascinating, all at once. But it is her eyes that captivated me early this week and set my spirit loose to consider this morning's meditation. For Teresa, as much as any other person I know of, tried to live her life in obedience and humility.

Today, I'd like to look at humility, not only because of a picture on a magazine cover, but because humility is one of the great virtues of the Christian faith that seems to be sorely missing in our culture today. And that's a problem, I believe, because humility is, perhaps, the most important virtue needed to address the myriad pressing problems of our time.

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The Gospel story in Luke, has the call to be humble as one of its many meanings. Jesus, you will recall, is at dinner at the home of a Pharisee and while there, observes the behavior of both host and guests. It's amazing how Jesus noticed the little things in life, the everyday activities of people and places and institutions, and the of the soil and sun and flowers. Nothing was too small or too ordinary or insignificant to escape his contemplative gaze as he saw God at work in every creature, every person, every situation. And so, Jesus tells a parable which is a clue that more than social graces are involved here. And then, he closes with a call for humility.

Now, there's a long history of this story being interpreted in such a way as to waste Jesus' lesson: "Take the low seat," so goes this way of looking at it, "so that not only will you avoid being embarrassed when someone else comes along, but that by humbling yourself, you'll be exalted. Get low so you'll be raised up high." It's a common way of interpreting this story but its one that chocked full of false human ego. Jesus doesn't offer a divinely approved way for a person to get what she or he wants. Taking the low seat to be humble is one thing; taking the low seat as a way to move up, is another.

So much for that way of interpreting the story. But if not that way, what is Jesus getting at here? Well, a lot of things, really, and one of them is a call for people to be who they've been created to be: humble. But by humble, or to practice humility, what I do not mean is that people have a particular place set out for them either by birth or the social, economic or religious customs of the day, and that everyone of us better know our place and stay there. A caste system of economic or social serfdom is about as far from the meaning of humility as you can get. And neither do I mean self-abnegation, a groveling around, flagellating your soul thereby making yourself the worst sinner the world has ever spawned. What humility is, in my estimation, is the conscious awareness of who you are, Whose you are, and your human place and purpose in the universe. Actually, the root word for humility lies in the second creation story in Genesis when God picks up some soil – humus – and shapes it into a human being: the human from the humus. And then, God breathes into the human, the Breath, the Wind, the Spirit, and the human comes alive, aware of himself, and to Whom and to what he belongs. Later in the story, full consciousness self-awareness is born when the man and woman eat the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, something they had been forbidden to do. (An interesting sidelight I read from the writings of Rabbi Greenbaum: Adam and Eve are expelled from the garden for an act of excess, uncontrolled consumption, eating the extra fruit they were not allowed).

So, humility has to do with three things: 1) our earthiness, our creature nature; 2) the spark of the Divine, the Sacred within us, and, 3) our conscious self-awareness of who we are. And that, of course, makes us a mixed bag – all our frailties and failures and all that makes us fantastic; and all of it is OK. We are both/and, and that's good enough; at least it's good enough for God.

Humility, then, is above all, honesty. It doesn't exaggerate our individual or collective importance. It doesn't look to who's better or the best. But neither does it degrade or negate our amazing uniqueness of being created in the image of God. Humility means that we recognize the wonderful fact that we belong to life, are intimately connected and intertwined in life and that we are an integral member of the community of life. And in this, we can have extreme confidence in who we are and our purposes in life, which is one of the characteristics of a person of humility: confidence. What I mean is the deep, down certainty that you are in the right "place" because God is in the place you are. It is the conviction that there are many and varied things you can be doing that is healthy and life-giving. It is the feeling that you are "home" in your own skin. A confident person is not afraid of trying out something new or different because she's not afraid of failing. She may very well fail – often, in fact – but that can't shake her certainty of who she is and Whose she is.

Another characteristic of humble people is that they are often working for change in the larger communities of which they are a part. They are the people who always seem to be standing against the tide, not content with the status quo, and fighting for and speaking for those who have no voice. They do so because they recognize that “it is what it is” is not necessarily the way God intends it to be. They stand up for what they believe in, even if people who benefit most fully from the status quo, tell them to sit down. Not in an angry or arrogant or self-righteous manner, which are three characteristics of people who lack humility. They do so with a quiet assurance because they know that to be here, doing what they’re doing, is right and good for life – despite what the world may believe.

Christian mystic and author, Thomas Merton, wrote, “A humble person is not afraid of failure. In fact, he is not afraid of anything, even of himself, since perfect humility implies perfect confidence in the power of God, before Whom there is no such thing as an obstacle. . . . Humility is the surest sign of strength.”

I believe this is so critical today in our age of violent divisiveness between the various human communities and the massive degradation of Earth. Why is it that we are so anxious today, so on edge, so at our emotional, spiritual and physical wits end? And why is it that much of the time, we don’t know why? Many reasons, of course, but the context for it all is the larger disintegration of things – the withering of the planet, the radical failure of so many of our social, economic, educational, legal and religious institutions to provide what is promised. And that is really hard to deal with. So hard, in fact, we often don’t really know which seat to sit in at the banquet table; we don’t know what is our place and purpose.

So here’s where the world is in such a need for the humble people Jesus calls for: the need to realize that you and I are integral to life – not above to sit at the places of honor to dominate and lord it over anything or anyone; not below to be stomped on, but connected – deeply, connected. I learned something this week. Did you know that the phrase homo sapiens means “wise ones”? That’s a pretty good description of what we’re called to be. And what if with that wisdom, we would open ourselves to the transformative power of allow God and recognize that what we are really are today, is homo universalis “universal ones”? And why not? That’s who we are, isn’t it?

I’m reading a little book called Radical Amazement: Contemplative Lessons from Black Holes, Supernovas, and Other Wonders of the Universe. In it, author Judy Cannato writes the following:

“Consider this: You are able to sit and read these words as the result of 13.7 billion years of development. Over the last four billion years, life on Earth has developed from primordial cells that did not even have a nucleus into Homo sapiens. The water in your body contains primordial hydrogen formed in the first seconds of the Big Bang. The carbon atoms that form you came together as a result of the explosion of a supernova. The concentration of salt in your body matches the concentration of salt in the ancient seas. Your cells are direct descendants of unicellular organisms that developed billions of years ago. You have a reptilian brain and are able to walk courtesy of vertebra that developed 510 million years ago. You see because chlorophyll molecules mutated so that,

like plant leaves, your eyes can capture the light from the Sun. And in your mother's womb your tiny body repeated the whole process of multicellular life on Earth, beginning as a single cell and then developing greater and greater complexity. . . . Our bodies express all the history of life on this planet. And that history is also the history of every mountain, every river, every ocean, every pond and every millimeter of rock and soil, every wisp of water vapor and every breath of the atmosphere blowing ceaselessly around our globe. In our bodies flows the knowledge of an entire planet, an entire solar system, and the universe. It is nothing short of spectacular and a cause for celebration!" (p. 65)

Amazing, isn't it? And what is even more amazing is that God has been and is at work in every single process, every single atom, every single system we set up, since the beginning of things and the beginning of you and me. How could we, as Thomas Merton wrote and Mother Teresa lived and Jesus embodied, be afraid of anything?

My prayer is that in this moment of such enormous planetary change, with the shaking of the foundations of much of what we've built up and known all our lives, there might be a movement of people, guided by the Spirit of the living God, sitting, as Jesus says, in the lower places, a movement to live lives of true humility, so that, indeed, we can move "higher," to the right place, to live as God's children in the midst of God's blessed creation.

May you know this blessing deep in your soul today.