

Sermon
Calvary Lutheran Church, Morro Bay
Twelfth Sunday After Pentecost
August 28, 2022
Luke 14:1, 7-14

This parable, at first, and second and third glances seems to be out of place in the gospels. It is rather contrived, not at all like Jesus. That is, in order to be important at a feast, you have to pretend not to be important? Take the lowest seat and then the host will tell you, “Oh Saul, you old devil, what are you and Rachel doing sitting down there? Come up by me!” And that is the gospel? Sounds more like advice for social success on the religious scene.

But Jesus didn't spend much of his time, it seems, in such lofty sabbath feasts with leaders of the Pharisees. We know that his practice was just the opposite. He would eat with ANYONE, and seemed to prefer social outcasts. And those ANYONES who followed Jesus knew this and, if any of them were present at the present feast in question, well... well, I don't think any of them would even be invited, do you?

Was this parable then just for the religious social climbers around the table? Was it for Jesus to give them as much of his teaching and practice that they could handle? This likely hostile group who were “watching him closely”, for a sign that would confirm their wish to have him dead or imprisoned? Hmmm. The pressure must have been on Jesus, because in the verses immediately preceding this parable, he had healed a man with dropsy. Right there in their midst, on a sabbath. Things had not started out well. Or they had started as they must.

Why this lesson for what I view as feigned humility? Well, perhaps it was to curry their favor. Or perhaps this lesson was not just Machiavellian, but a first step for some of them, a baby step toward the realm of God.

Be that as it may, for those of us who have thought a bit about what it means to be humble, there is plenty enough to think about in Jesus' words. Those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.

Let me say, though, that there are plenty of people in the world who don't need a lesson in humility, having suffered daily humiliation for their whole lives. Who are through with lessons about being humble. The rest of this sermon is not for you. It is more for someone like me.

E.B. White wrote a wonderful children's book, enjoyable also by adults, as all great children's books are, called *Charlotte's Web*. Ostensibly, the main character is Wilbur the pig, a runt of his litter, raised by young Fern, sold to Homer Zuckerman, and slated for someone's dinner table. Charlotte is a spider in the new barn, a tiny creature with a big heart. And she takes up Wilbur's lost cause. She does so by weaving words into her web. The first two are **Some Pig**. That gets attention. The farmer notices, and people start coming to see Wilbur, imagining him as "some pig." Not as in "Let's have some pig!" but as in, "this pig is some-thing!" Other miraculously woven words follow: **Terrific**, and then **Radiant**. Each time, being called these things, Wilbur begins to take them on, become terrific and radiant in the process.

For the last word, Charlotte asks Templeton the rat to find one. He comes up with **Humble**. Which for most people means "not of much worth," or "lowly," or "demeaned." But to Fern, the farmer's young daughter, it means "not proud" or "close to the ground." Because in English, the "hum" of "humble" means the earth, as in *humus*. After being called Some Pig and Terrific and Radiant, it helped Wilbur to come down to earth to be called Humble as well. But humility also can mean other things, like having regard for others, being sincere and honest and

unselfish and thoughtful, and might we say, mature. Frankly those words can even more be applied to the spider Charlotte.

You might say that, in general, being around animals can make one humble. There is this dialogue between Fern's mother, who is worried about Fern reporting conversations among the animals, and a doctor, that goes like this:

Mrs. Arable fidgeted. "Fern says the animals talk to each other. Dr. Dorian, do you believe animals talk?"

"I never heard one say anything," he replied. "But that proves nothing. It is quite possible that an animal has spoken civilly to me and that I didn't catch the remark because I wasn't paying attention. Children pay better attention than grownups. If Fern says that the animals in Zuckerman's barn talk, I'm quite ready to believe her. Perhaps if people talked less, animals would talk more. People are incessant talkers – I can give you my word on that."

Our friend, Julie Webb, is a pastor, and also an animal communicator. I might have told you about her already. She communicates with animals by being very still and listening. If you don't expect an animal to say anything, you likely won't hear anything. But after Julie had a session with our dog Jack, trying to find out why he was peeing so much inside, we understand him much better. And he us. And our mutual love has deepened. And our worldview has become more gracious. And certainly more humble, even though we have a long way to go.

I read in a recent AARP magazine that one way to increase your odds of living to 100 when you're in your 60s (the odds of which are five in one hundred, if you wanted to know) is to go to church four times a month. Ha! It's true. Those who attend religious services this much have been linked with four to fourteen (!) years of increased life expectancy! I can think of worse evangelistic messages! And why might going to church extend one's life? Well, it could be the faith, hope and love, and fellowship and joy that we experience here. And it also could have to do with humility.

Here's what Mary said at the funeral of her father Tom some years ago. She writes,

My father Tom, was a person who had great energy and ideas. He was, as my brother Tom said, "a conceptual person". He was a visionary. And one of his desires when he was a younger man was to be of great influence, to be important, and to matter. He was an incredible networker, and did make a huge difference in the world.

He, like many of us, wanted to be admired and respected. It gave him great satisfaction to be noticed and famous. In fact, just the other day a newsletter came in the mail, and on the back was a picture of Tom with former president Gerald Ford!

Tom practiced service and hospitality because he was influenced by *camping* with Jesus. The more time he spent there, the more he became embedded in the community of the human race, with his family, at his church community, in his neighborhood, and in the city of Denver, in the individual lives of many people.

This tent living, dwelling in the presence of Jesus, changed Tom. While he initially thought fame would bring him peace, he found that service and humility brought him a different kind of distinction. A fame that glorified God and blessed humankind, and as a result gave him great joy. The longer he lived in close association with Jesus, the more he was transformed to desire what Jesus desired. The more he came to know God's tender and generous love.

And at the end of his life, God moved him to desire to serve a different population. He wanted to serve children, serve them by storytelling, by going to schools and spending time in north Denver, tickling the imaginations of children, to open their horizons. They loved him and were blessed by his gifts to them.

By the way, the odds of becoming famous, depending of course on how you define fame, are about one in one-a-half-thousand. Which means that the odds that anyone in this sanctuary right now is famous is about one in forty-three, if you count the children. While the odds of becoming humble, and being of humble service, are much greater! The odds of such a development are not mentioned in the AARP magazine. To which, service or fame, might we more successfully aspire?

Frederick Buechner, a Presbyterian minister, very famous for his writing, died just a couple of weeks ago. He was beloved by so many. He sparked joyful thought. He had this to say about humility:

Humility is often confused with saying you're not much of a bridge player when you know perfectly well you are. Conscious or otherwise, this kind of humility is a form of gamesmanship.

If you really *aren't* much of a bridge player, you're apt to be rather proud of yourself for admitting it so humbly. This kind of humility is a form of low comedy. [Creating laughter through boasting, buffoonery and the like.]

True humility doesn't consist of thinking ill of yourself but of not thinking of yourself much differently from the way you'd be apt to think of anybody else. It is the capacity for being no more and no less pleased when you play your own hand well than when your opponents do.

The author of Hebrews has a bit to say about living in the humble way of Jesus. It means showing mutual love, being hospitable to strangers, visiting those in prison, ministering to the tortured, being faithful, and content, imitating your leaders, and offering praise to God. Hmmm, maybe humility OUGHT to be included with faith, hope and love.

But when it comes right down to it, we OUGHT NOT consider our humility as our ticket to get into heaven, or even to get a score on our test of humanity. We can be humble because it is the way of life. When we are truly humble, if we should fall, then it is not a long way to the ground.

And if we are instructed to imitate our leaders, than there is our leader Jesus, who did not consider his equality with God to be something to hold onto, but emptied himself and became obedient to God, even death on the cross. We are all children of a humble and humbled God. Figure that out! A God who disdained heaven to be with this motley crew, who so loved the world, in a story that is so wondrous that falling to our knees is a natural reaction. To the ground from which we all are made, from both a religious and a scientific standpoint. Or as a sitting

point. A place of sitting, like we're out camping with God. Amen to humility, however we come by it.

Rev. Brian Stein-Webber

August 27, 2022