

A professor of preaching at an American seminary used to tell the painful story of his first attempt to preach a sermon. Fresh from some minor triumphs in high school and college speech classes, he confidently strode to the pulpit full of brashness and self-importance. To his dismay, he discovered he didn't have all that much to say and what he did say came out badly. After a few miserable minutes, he gave up the effort and sat down in a mood of dejection and defeat. A wise old listener put his arm around the young preacher after the service and supplied a bit of wise counsel. "Young man," he said, "If you had gone up there like you came down, you would have come down like you went up."

Jesus had something similar to say at a dinner he attended "at the house of a ruler who belonged to the Pharisees." (Luke 14:1, 7-14) The prideful people in the Pharisee's house mirror us all to some extent. We all have trouble realizing that we are abridged editions of omnipotence. Even when we get bumped, as Jesus says will inevitably happen, we have difficulty downsizing the ego. But if faith is the way we want to travel, humility is the roadbed. Jesus was high on humility.

Jesus' warning was necessary because our lives can so easily be caught up in an arrogant, jealous, self-righteous egotism that keeps us from experiencing the Kingdom of God. There are several reasons we should cultivate the attribute of humility if we want to live an abundant life.

**For instance, humility is necessary for a right relationship with God.** St. Peter says, "God resists the proud and gives grace to the humble" (I Peter 5:5). Pride inflates the balloon of ego until it enlarges to such proportions that God and others are squeezed right out of our lives. Attachment to our possessions is a major contributing factor to the inflation of the ego. Our other readings for today strongly admonish us to discipline ourselves with regard to our possessions in order to remain humble before God.

It's an old, old story. The story of the Fall of humanity in the book of Genesis has Satan subtly and successfully catching Eve with the temptation, "You shall be like God" (Genesis 3:5). She succumbed. Her pride damaged her relationship with God. And the same thing goes for Adam.

We see the same sort of pride in operation in today's gospel: Guests assuming the prerogatives of the host. So, Jesus reminds them that it is the host who arranges the seats. It is God who establishes the seating arrangements in the Kingdom. Spiritual disciplines such as worship, service, hospitality, study, and generosity are means by which we grow in our humility before God when we come to the Feast.

In the Letter to the Philippians, there is a passage we refer to as "the kenosis hymn." That word, *kenosis*, means "to empty." It describes the way reconciliation between God and humanity takes place with the omnipotent God taking the initiative and showing us how to do it.

"Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, 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. Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Philippians 2:3-11).

St. Augustine, reflecting on this powerful passage of scripture, wrote: “Why are you proud? God became humble for your sake! Perhaps you would be ashamed to imitate a humble man; then at least imitate a humble God.” This is the key to restoring our relationship with God and the means of telling the world of God. You and I are the windows through which others gaze at God. Humility in our relationship with God is necessary in order for that to happen.

**And, humility is necessary for a right relationship with the self.** Dostoyevsky said, “One who bows to nothing can never bear the burden of himself.” Loosely translated, that means the bigger they are, the harder they fall. Jesus saw an unhealthy tension in the lives of those who were scrambling for seats of honor in the Pharisee’s house. His words were intended to offer those people a mirror so they could see the lie they were living. Humility, a reasonable estimate and a genuine acceptance of who I really am, is necessary for wholeness. I must live with myself every day and, if that’s hard to do, then something is wrong. My humanity suffers.

Some of you who are baseball fans may remember Joe Morgan, who was an outstanding player for the Houston Astros. I remember one game in which he made an amazingly difficult catch, which resulted in a double play. The crowd went wild! It was some time before Joe Morgan realized we were cheering *him*. It caught him quite off guard. He looked at the crowd as if to say, “All I did was what I was supposed to do. Why all the fuss?” What we witnessed in his response was a man who, though exalted in the eyes of his fans, has a humble, reasonable amount of appreciation for himself. A great ball player, just playing ball to the best of his ability. I’d like to play on a team with a person like that!

**And, of course, we need humility in order to have a right relationship with others.** When you stop to think about it, I believe you will agree that arrogance and selfishness are at the heart of most problems in interpersonal relationships from the home and neighborhood to world affairs. Such hubris can only be crushed by humility. Dr. Harry Emerson Fosdick once said, “The psychologically healthy person rejoices in the excellence of others, objectively interested in whatever he is giving his life to he is glad when another appears who is better than himself.” That is a wise statement. Rejoicing when someone excels even more than you do. That’s not easy, but it’s the way of God’s people.

This point of humility in our relationships with one another reminds me of a story of a dream, which was related by a Chinese Christian. He dreamed he died and when he arrived on the other side he was shown a magnificent banquet table spread with every good thing to eat. He was told he was in Hell and the news upset him. “If this is Hell, what is this feast doing here?” “Watch,” said his guide. In a moment he saw people rush in, scramble for seats, and finally attack the food. Every person had one hand secured behind the back and a long spoon attached to the arm so their arms could not bend. They could not get the food on the spoons into their mouths. And there was weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Then the man was taken to another place. There he saw the same table, set for a succulent feast. There he saw the same kind of people with one arm bound and the other arm attached to the spoon. His guide said, “This is Heaven.” “What is the difference?” asked the man. “Watch,” said the guide. And as he watched, the people came to be seated at the table, each one assisting the other. Then when they sat down, they bowed their heads in gratitude for a moment. Then each one took the food on the spoons attached to their unbending arm and fed the person seated across the table.

A great feast is set in God’s Realm, here and now. The host has summoned those who are hungry and have no way of repaying the generosity. The seating arrangement has not yet been fully established by the host. The invitation is extended. “Come to the Feast!” Humble yourselves and exalt and undergird one another and be exalted yourself by the very knowledge that you are among the invited, among those whom God has called. Happy are those who feast at this banquet table in humility.

“Through him, then, let us continually offer a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that confess his name. Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God” (Hebrews 13:16).