

Humble Service

In the name of him who is the same yesterday and today and forever, dear friends in Christ: Today's Old Testament and Gospel lessons extol the Christian virtue of humility, which is by far the most elusive of all the desirable qualities the Lord directs us to pursue in our lives. What makes it elusive? It's simple: you can tell when you're acting in ways that are patient or kind or gentle or forgiving; but how can you tell if you're being humble? If you were truly humble, you'd be the last one to know it because if you did think that you were humble – that you possessed that virtue: "Wow! I've done it! I've attained humility" – it would prove that you weren't. The very act of looking inward and finding something in yourself worthy of recognition or praise smacks of pride, which is the exact opposite of humility. A humble person doesn't look at himself searching for goodness. He doesn't think there's any there. Instead he considers others better and more worthy than himself.

That's why there's some real irony in the advice that Jesus gives in today's Gospel. He says, "When you are invited to a wedding banquet, don't sit in a place of honor, lest someone more distinguished than you also be invited, and he who invited you both will come and say to you, 'Give your place to this person.'" You see, in those days the seats at the table were ranked in order from top to bottom, and your place was assigned by your overall standing in society. That standing depended on a lot of factors we don't need to go into; but the point is that everyone was aware of where they stood with respect to everyone else. So, Jesus' advice is good: don't pick a place that's too high, otherwise you may be humiliated if you have to give your seat to someone higher up. So far so good. But here's the strange part: Jesus says pick the lowest place. That way when the host sees you sitting there he'll have you move up and dethrone someone else. You'll be exalted in the eyes of all, and someone else will be humiliated. ... Wait. This is a good thing? It sounds more like a sneaky trick to draw attention to yourself – which is the last thing a truly humble person wants to do. A humble person would take the last place because that's where he thinks he belongs.

Of course, Jesus' trick might backfire on someone who tried it for the purposes of gaining attention. The host might see you sitting there in the lowest place, agree that's where you belong, and just leave you there. Then you would be humiliated; which I'm afraid is what it takes. The problem is that all of us are infected with the sin of pride through and through. Humility doesn't come naturally to us. We can't choose to be humble. We can *act* like it, *pretend* to be humble; but we can't really be it, not on our own, anyway. What it takes is for someone to humiliate us – to put us in our proper place, to show us that we're not what we would like to think we are.

And the person best suited for that task is none other than Jesus himself. He showed us where we deserved to be when he stood in our place before the court and was accused of countless crimes. He showed us our place when he was brutally beaten, the skin on his back hanging in shattered shreds. He showed us the place we earned for ourselves when nailed to the cross he cried out in agony, "My, God, why have you forsaken me?" He says to each of us, "That was your place, the lowest of all". And he shows us what true humility is when he says, "And I took that place for you." If that doesn't humble you, nothing will.

And it puts things in perspective. It brings us all to the same level. It shows us that none of us deserves anything but the lowest place, but since that place was taken by Jesus we don't

have to go there. He died that we could be exalted and raised to glory in his kingdom. And now he, having taken the lowest place for himself is exalted about all. And he bids us, "Follow my example of humble service." Not that we have to die as a sacrifice for anyone's sins, that's done. Instead, we are to live sacrificially for others, placing their needs, their good, and whatever is to their benefit above our own.

This is our true act of worship. We usually get it wrong. We think of the hour or two we spend here on Sundays as worship, our weekly (or sadly less frequent) religious obligation. "This is where we serve the Lord." No. Completely incorrect. This is where the Lord serves us. This is where he humbly serves us through his Word, convicting us of our sins and cleansing us of them. This is where he gives us the fruit of the Tree of Life: his body and blood from the cross. This is where he fills us with his Spirit and transforms our character, giving us the mind of Christ, so that we think like he does. This is where God does for you.

Your worship of the Lord, your religious obligation to him, is everything that happens after the benediction. It's your humble service in the various vocations you have, whatever they are. That's where you worship the Lord all week long in everything you think, say, and do.

That puts a different perspective on things, doesn't it? It elevates all those mundane tasks and duties you perform to acts of devotion to the Lord. You are worshipping him in your work for others. What you do is therefore to be holy unto the Lord, acts rendered as if to him. And you are to see them that way. And to help us in this regard, to give us some direction, we turn to today's reading from Hebrews in which the inspired author describes what our acts of worship are and how they are to be performed.

He says, "Let brotherly love continue." Charity, as they say, begins at home among the members of your own family. And here the family in question is the family of God, our brothers and sisters in Christ. Jesus himself said this is to be one of the foremost marks of the faithful: "All men will know you are my disciples by your love for one another." This means that our primary devotion to the Lord is the service we render to our fellow saints. When one of us needs a hand, we give it. When one of us comes up short, we provide what's lacking. When one of us needs a word of encouragement or advice or even of warning, we speak it. We take care of each other as members of a family, for that is what we are. It's what we're called to do. And so doing we are worshipping the Lord.

He continues, "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers." The translation is a bit weak. It actually says to show love to strangers. He means new comers, travelers, and in a broader sense everyone else out there whom you don't know or whom you don't know well who is not part of our church family. You are to treat them all with kindness and respect and Christian love. This includes the clerk at the store who's taking too long, the waitress who messed up your order, the mechanic you think is overcharging you for labor due to his own incompetence in locating the problem, the driver who seems bent on infuriating you with his lack of driving skills or common courtesy, and the police officer who pulls you over for what you think is a too minor offense for him to bother with. All of these people are to walk away from their interaction with you thinking the same thing they would as if they had dealt with Jesus Christ himself (except Jesus wouldn't be pulled over for speeding). Again, the principle is this: you are to see the way you deal with strangers as acts of worship to the Lord.

Next he says, "Remember those in prison, as though in prison yourself, and those who are mistreated, since you also are in the body." This is a bit more difficult to apply. The writer has in mind primarily those who are in prison or being mistreated for confessing the name of

Jesus. That's not happening in our time – at least not here and for the present. And in those days people were only held in prison pending their trials. If convicted, punishment would follow; but it would never be to go back to prison. They didn't warehouse convicts for long periods of time like we do. No, instead you'd be killed or beaten or fined or exiled or sold into slavery, depending on the crime.

But also back in those days the authorities didn't feed or provide clothing for those held in prison awaiting trial. That was the responsibility of their families and friends. And so what the writer of Hebrews means is that if one of the members of the church is in prison for confessing the faith, it's the whole church's job to take care of that person. Likewise, if they were subsequently punished, say beaten or fined, we all pull together to help the person out. This could be dicey, of course. If someone is being persecuted for their faith, you going to help that person identifies you to the authorities as "one of them". It's like painting a target on yourself. But, you see, love accepts that risk. The needs of those being persecuted supersede the safety of those who aren't. And our love and boldness in taking care of our own in spite of the danger we may face will make a powerful witness to our enemies.

Like I said, this is difficult to apply to us because we're dealing with an entirely different set of circumstances. But I think we can see our need to reach out to support and defend our brothers and sisters in Christ who are being persecuted elsewhere in the world. Neither should we neglect to support prison ministries in their efforts to proclaim the Gospel to those incarcerated for real crimes.

Moving on. The writer continues, "Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled, for God will judge the sexually immoral and adulterous." Now, there's an interesting thought: the way you treat your spouse: your love, your support, your honoring and cherishing of that person, the forgiveness you give them when they do something that makes you angry ... all the things you do for them – to include the giving of your body in sexual intimacy – all of that is worship unto the Lord. (And yes, I know what you're thinking: "Hey, c'mon Honey, let's worship the Lord together".) No, seriously, God designed marriage and all that goes with it. And he declared it good. He also laid down its parameters and limits – which as you know are increasingly coming under attack in our society that doesn't want to hold marriage in the sacred honor God intends it to have. This is why it's all the more incumbent on us to uphold the goodness of God's design, to keep ourselves sexually pure and chaste, to denounce unnecessary divorce, to help couples in conflict keep their marriages intact, and to make our own marriages models of Christian love and fidelity. In so doing we are worshipping the Lord.

Next comes the trust issue. The writer continues, "Keep your life free from the love of money, and be content with what you have, for he has said, "Never will I leave you nor forsake you'." The statement is true: if money is your god, the thing you place your trust in, you will never have enough. But if the Lord is your God, the one whom you trust, you'll always have enough. But not necessarily *more* than enough. We pray for *daily* bread; not for what we'll need next week, next year, or when we reach old age. The Lord wants our trust to be in him, not in how much we manage to accumulate for a rainy day or for retirement. That doesn't mean we shouldn't engage in wise financial planning. It means we should never place our confidence in money. There is no investment or bank account or form of currency so secure that isn't subject to being lost or stolen in an instant. It's a poor substitute for him whose continued love and fatherly care are guaranteed. We worship him when we place all of our hope and trust in him.

Now comes my favorite: “Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the Word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith.” What the writer has in mind here are those who preach and teach in the church: primarily the pastors and presumably also in our time those commissioned to teach in our Lutheran schools. Now, it’s very likely that when he says “Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith”, he means that they were martyred for confessing Christ, and that you too should go down the same way should you be called to do so. But later he adds, “Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy, and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.”

It may sound self-serving, but this is part of the Word of God, so I’m obligated to teach it – not just for myself but for all who serve in the ministry. The hardest part of a pastor’s job is when he has to confront someone in the church privately with their sin in order to call them to repentance. He knows he’s likely to hear denial, face anger and personal abuse, and become an object of scorn not just to the one being confronted, but also to their family, friends, and other allies for whom blood is thicker than the ink on the pastor’s call document. The point to be made is that it is the Lord who calls men into the office and places them as shepherds to care for his flock. And when they are doing what they have been called to do, they are to be honored and obeyed. To the best of your ability, you are to make their work a pleasure to perform rather than a burden to bear. So, if called to repent, give thanks to the Lord for sending someone to warn you. If asked to take a stand with an unrepentant family member or friend who’s been confronted and now wants the pastor’s head on a platter, tell them, “No. What he told you is right. And I too want you to repent and receive Christ’s forgiveness.” In other words, support your pastor and make his service for you a joy. And of course the best way for you to do this is simply to be here to hear and receive Christ’s gifts. Attend the divine service. Come to Bible study. That’s why God gave you your pastor – whoever he happens to be. And you worship the Lord by the respect and obedience you pay to his representative.

There’s much more that can be said about all of this, but we will save it for another time. Hopefully the point has been made. Here we receive the gifts of Christ who suffered and died for our sin. Our worship of the Lord takes place in the humble service we offer to others in his name and for his sake. Understanding this, let us through Jesus continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name, not neglecting to do good and to share what we have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God, through Jesus Christ our Lord, and in his holy name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!