

Jan 12, 2020
Rev. Jane Florence
“Heart of Humility”
Luke 14: 7-11



He came from Lubbock, Texas to the pop charts in the 1970s. He wasn't what you'd call a macho man or a sex symbol of the 70s. Mac Davis had curly hair, and a crooked grin, a rather large nose, and he giggled. So when he sang,

Oh 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.

It was funny. It was true in a way. His appeal came from something within. He was so down to earth so humble. Humility is considered a virtue, but it is hard to obtain.

A story is told of Jesus who goes to a dinner party at the home of a prominent Pharisee, a leader in their religious community. It's an interesting situation- a bit of cat and mouse going on here. The religious leaders have invited Jesus to dinner – not out of sincere desire to be with him, or learn from him, but in order to check him out. There is some hostility circulating regarding Jesus already, and he knows it. But Jesus doesn't shy away from a good game of cat and mouse with the powerful; he is not intimidated by them.

The text says that they are 'carefully watching' him. It appears that he is carefully watching them also. This is a fancy dinner. Fancy enough to have a head table, but not fancy enough to have place cards indicating seating assignments. So I imagine, Jesus standing off to the side, watching people enter. They check out the room, as we do when we enter a room. He sees people notice where the kitchen door is that's where servants will be coming in and out. They notice where the wine steward is; it could be handy to sit near the bar. They notice where the head table is, the seats of honor. He watches as people work the room and choose their seats up front near the host- where the best will be served, first. I imagine just as they plop their bottoms down on the best silken cushions- Jesus clears his throat and offers up a story: “when you go to the wedding banquet, don't sit yourself up for embarrassment. What if your host tells you to move back here?” No doubt, their faces burn red at this. Jesus says, “how much better it would be to be asked to move up; than to be told to step down.” Thusly, Jesus begins a lesson in humility.

Jesus taught many lessons about a reversal of the world order- where the last will be first and the first will be last. Jesus taught many lessons against pride and arrogance- usually using the Pharisees as the characters of his stories. Teaching about humility was common for Jesus, but he did not just teach *about it*; he lived it himself.

Imagine the gospel authors interviewing people about Jesus to compile their works. Did you know Jesus fellow? Yes. What was he like? He was great ; a great wisdom teacher; a miracle worker; a prophet, yet he was humble. The gospel authors conveyed Jesus as humble. Luke told a story of him entering lowly Bethlehem riding in the womb of a peasant on a donkey. They tell that he entered Jerusalem riding to his death on a donkey. No kingly entourage- just a donkey.

They told stories of Jesus, who was called the Master, the Teacher, Rabboni, who took off his robe and picked up a towel. Who knelt to the floor, took student's dirty feet in his own hands and lovingly washed them clean. Rising he told him, “ Now that I, your Lord

and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. " (John 13: 12-20) Jesus taught humility in words and action.

The story is told of the Buddha walking about and coming upon a monk lying on the ground. The Buddha saw the man was ill; he had collapsed and lay there in his own excrements. Buddha asked, " Brother, what ails you?" The monk replied, " I have dysentery, Lord." " Is anyone taking care of you, brother?" the Buddha asked. " No" the monk replied. " why not?" The monk said, " I am useless, so the monks do not take care of me." Buddha took up water. With his own hands, he washed the filth and stench; he washed the monk clean and placed him upon the bed. Then the Buddha gathered the order of monks together and told them, " You have no mother and no father to take care of you. If you will not take care of each other, who else will do so? Monks, those who would attend to me, let you also attend to one another." ¹

These great teachers of world faiths were not too important to serve, not too important to honor others. They were humble.

My second summer in Nebraska, I went to Rocky Mt. Nat'l Park for a few days. I've told you that I most often travel alone, but this time I went with a friend. It was a good thing because we drove Trail Ridge Road to the top of the peak. I say, "we" but I did not drive. The road climbs over 12,000 ft in elevation. I later learned that it's the highest continuous paved road in the US. That's high for anyone I would think. While I love my road trips, I do not like driving mountains. I have added days to a trip and several states to avoid a mountain pass on a mapped itinerary. I grew up on the Gulf coast where the elevation of Brownsville, Texas is 33 ft. above sea level. It was approximately 33 miles from my house to the waters edge. Do the math. For every mile I drove, the elevation would change approx. 12 inches. In flat land as far as one can see, I would squint at highway overpasses to imagine what 'hills' might look like. Any road embankment in south Texas with a foot or more drop-off had guardrails for safety. Trail Ridge road at 12,000 ft elevation is high. There are places where the Trail Ridge Road is a narrow, curvy two lane road with the white outside lane stripe runs about 3 inches from a sheer drop-off to certain death is very high. There are places without guard rails! The mountain peaks were spectacular when I dared to look with my white knuckles clenched and my right foot fully depressing the non-existent brake on the passenger floor at all times.

As we drove around the area, I was in a mixture of sublime awe of the mountains and heart-stopping terror of the cliff-hugging roads. I alternated between "ooing" at the beauty and "sssing, slow down!" when I sensed we were too close to the edge, when I was startled by something suddenly right beside my window. There was a man, in his spandex riding outfit and helmet, cycling past my window like the old woman in the Wizard of Oz! I watched in disbelief as this man kept his front tire perfectly centered down the white stripe barely three inches from the chasm of death- as he passed us. No doubt, the man had nerves of steel and perfect balance. This was not his first time on a bike. and he didn't have a passenger screeching in fear. Physical balance like his takes practice, great skill, and muscles toned in perfect tension. It was like watching a tight rope artist as he glided smoothly down the line.

¹ Jack Kornfield. Teachings of the Buddha. Boston: Shambhala, 1996. (adapted from the VINAYA, translated by F.L. Woodard.

Physical balance can be a fine tuned skill. Likewise, spiritual balance takes practice and effort. It takes intentionality and dedication to get and keep ourselves in balance. At the point of spiritual balance, we find humility. If we tip over to one side, we fall in the abyss of pride, arrogance and haughtiness. In that abyss, we become self-centered and self-consumed with our own importance. We come to believe that it is all about us, and that we are the center of our own universe. When we are full of pride, we know how good we are, usually, we know how less than others are because we know how much we know. Excessive pride closes us to others; and closes us from learning.

An old Zen legend tells of an accomplished young man who came to a teacher seeking enlightenment. The young man introduced himself, and the master poured tea. The young man spoke effusively of his life and of his achievements. The master continued to pour the tea. As the man talked on, the tea spilled over the sides of the cup. “ Stop,” said the young man. “ don’t you see what you’re doing?” The old master smiled, his eyes twinkling as he replied, “ you cannot fill a cup that is already full.” ² If we become too full of ourselves, too assured that our own way is THE only way, we cannot learn or grow or serve others.

Spiritual balance is humility requiring much practice and skill. If we tip over to one side we fall to pride, but on the other side, we fall in the abyss of self-depreciation, self-hatred, self-loathing. We devalue our intrinsic worth. We lack self-respect. We doubt our own value; we live in shame. Not guilt for something we have done. but shame for who we are. We fail to see the image of God in us; therefore we fail to see it in others.

World Religion sages teach the wisdom of finding our healthy place of balance. They teach of humility. Humility is Not full of self, and it’s not abusing self. Not better than; not less than; it is realizing our oneness with others.

The path to humility is recognizing that we are not God. We are not perfect or all-knowing. It’s not about praying our will be done. Admitting that we are not in control, and we are not God, keeps us from falling to arrogance. The path to humility is also recognizing that we are beloved. We are not God, but we carry the Divine within. We are vessels of Divine Love. As we acknowledge that we are beloved, we recognize our unity with all others who also bear the Divine within.

Jesus and Buddha and other wise teachers show us that in nurturing a heart of humility we can serve one another without resentment or judgement, without condescension or pity, but with Divine Love overflowing in joy. May a heart of humility and love be with you today. Amen.

May it be so today.

² Sir John Templeton. *Wisdom from World Religions*. Philadelphia: Templeton Foundation Press, 2002, p. 95