

Sermon for Proper 17

RCL Lectionary, Year C

[Sirach 10:12-18](#) / [Psalm 112](#) / [Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16](#) / [Luke 14:1, 7-14](#)

The Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost

August 29th, 2010

The Episcopal Church of Our Saviour

Mill Valley, California

Real Humility

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Last week, on the subject of keeping the Holy Day holy, we learned about true religion. This week, as we confront the primordial sin of pride in our readings, Jesus discloses to us the foundational Christian virtue of humility.

Now as a community in the Episcopal tradition, this talk of sin and virtue may make a number of us uncomfortable. You know how we jokingly call ourselves "Catholic light" at times – all the sacramental beauty without the guilt. That's hard, and not just on our Roman Catholic sisters and brothers, but on ourselves and the true depth and breadth of our tradition. Because there's more to us than simply beautiful liturgy and to be told that God loves us. There is, of course, more than falling prey to the fear-filled theology that we are all broken and therefore unworthy before our God. Neither approach to faith fills the full measure of our salvation, our healing and restoration as a people on a spiritual journey in God's grace. We have to consider more deeply in our hearts what God in Christ has done and is doing for us in the way of the cross, which could be defined as the way of humility. It is the way, as the Letter to the Hebrews tells us today, by which we identify with the "least," with the prisoners and the suffering. It is also in the way we attend to our promises through thick and thin, the way self-offering vows and accountability -- even in the face of death -- form the measure of our character.

Pride, the subject our wisdom reading this day from Sirach, is the primordial sin of the Judeo-Christian tradition. We could argue it is THE sin of our tradition, the willful setting aside of God for our own ambitions and pursuits. Whether it's plucking the fruit from tree of judgment -- knowledge of good and evil; whether it's the murderous jealousy between Cain and Abel; the building a tower in Babel; the envy and ambitions of kings, the wayward idolatry of God's chosen, or the scheming for power of religious authorities and Empire in Jesus' day. . .The underscoring sin is pride. The assumption of pride is that our own agendas trump God's. The author of Sirach, in a pithy manner after the Book of Proverbs, outlines the fruit of pride and the toppling of our proud arrogances by a grace that seems at first like wrath, by a God who insists on bringing us out of our fantasies about our own lordship and back to the reality of our contingency, our reliance on the One who made us. For that is what true humility is about -- not false modesty. Reality is where humility begins.

Humility is about the truth of who we are in the mutual love God intends for us, in the self-offering of a God who withholds no good thing from hearts open to grace.

Just by being here this morning, you are already a good part of the way of connecting again with the humility of this reality. Few in Marin darken the door of a church community without first recognizing a heartfelt need for community, the human need for interdependence. In our hyper self-reliant society -- one often built on the foundations of pride -- the recognition of our contingency and vulnerability is the first step away from a prideful falsehood towards a more genuine humility. The recognition that we need God, and the patterning of our lives in putting God first is another step on that journey. It's one we must take each day -- not just Sundays -- but with each decision in every waking moment.

Jesus, in his parable and teachings of our Gospel this day, takes us deeper into this life of humility. Jesus knows that our pride divides us as a human family, and he grounds his teaching in the real context of invitation to a meal hosted by a Pharisee -- a meal where pride is in operation as guests are seated and religiosity of the proud kind is in operation. As Christians, Jesus challenges us to a humility born of practice, not simply of psychology or false piety. This practical humility is to avoid the claiming for ourselves the seats of power and honor that the self-exalted may be humbled and the humble exalted; to invite the un-invitable, those least able to repay us, to reach out to those most in need and most different from us with. Humility, Jesus shows us, is lived in relationship -- it's not an internal psychological state. Like all Christian virtues, it is lived in real terms, not merely idealized.

Today's Gospel also reflects a measure of our spiritual health as a community, a family brought together in Christ's name. How well we are doing spiritually is not measured in the splendor of our liturgy, the beauty of our building, or the balance of our accounts. Important as these are, these are only the vessels that hold and sustain our gatherings as a community. What matters more is the diversity of our membership, the breadth of humanity we find here. What matters is that we invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind of all kinds -- spiritual, physical, emotional, intellectual. What matters is we invite those are like us in only one principal way -- they cannot fully pay for the grace they receive in our beloved Christ!

The cornerstone of our life together as Christians is our gathering at table for what has been called the "feast of the world's redemption." Communion is intended to be a model of the meal Jesus outlines in his parable this day -- one in which pride is set aside and to which the broken are invited. Our challenge, now and always, is to embrace the humility this sacrament demands -- a humility that begins in the setting aside of our pride with the recognition of our failings and brokenness.

In an act that the world continues to find shocking, it is in the brokenness of bread called Christ's body, in wine we call his life blood offered, that we find eucharist after eucharist our true humility. It is in that humility that God in Christ embraces

our needful brokenness and even the pride of divine judgment is overcome with a greater reality: the infinite abundance of love that God in Christ has for us -- a love that remakes, heals, and renews our humanity. The same love that knocks us off our false pedestals is the love that picks us up, dusts us off, and restores us to wholeness. And if each of us receive this kind of love, all of us do together. And then there is no room for pride anymore. There is room only for a grace that binds us together as God's children, living as we do from mercy to blessed mercy, being transformed by the greatest love of all – the love that leads to the resurrected life.

But it is a love that we are only ready to most fully receive when we, as people of faith, are most humble. . . are most real.

A friend sent me this poem by Chuck Lathrop entitled "In Search of a Round Table" that puts our transformative journey as a spiritual family, as a parish, as a body engaged in Christ's ministry, so beautifully in the context of our sacramental life in community where pride of all kinds is set aside. It is entitled "In Search of a Round Table."

*It will take some sawing to be roundtabled.
Some redefining and redesigning,
some redoing and rebirthing
of narrow long Churching
can painful be
for people and tables.*

*It would mean no daising
and throning,
for but one king is there
and he is a foot washer,
at table no less.*

*And what of narrow long ministers
when they confront
a round table people,
after years of working up the table
to finally sit at its head,
only to discover
that the table has been turned round?*

*They must be loved into roundness,
for God has called a People
not "them and us".
"Them and us" are unable
to gather round; for at a round table
there are no sides
and all are invited*

to wholeness and to food.

*At one time
our narrowing churches
were built to resemble the Cross
but it does no good
for building to do so,
if lives do not.*

*Round tabling means
no preferred seating,
no first and last,
no better, and no corners
for the "least of these".*

*Roundtabling means
being with,
a part of,
together and one.*

*It means room for the Spirit
and gifts
and disturbing profound peace for all.*

*We can no longer prepare for the past
to be Church,
and if He calls for other than a round table
we are bound to follow.*

*Leaving the sawdust
and chips, designs and redesigns
behind, in search of and in presence of
the Kingdom
that is His and not ours.*