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Grace Cathedral, San Francisco, CA W33
15 Pentecost (Proper 17C) 8:30 and 11:00 a.m. Eucharist
Sunday 28 August 2016

Sir. 10:12-18
Ps. 112
Heb. 13:1-8,15-16
Lk. 14:1,7-14

Humble Again

"The beginning of human pride is to forsake the Lord; the heart has withdrawn from its Maker"
(Sirach 10).

When Dag Hammarskjöld (1905-1961), the Secretary-General of the United Nations, died in a plane crash in Zambia, he discovered the following passage in his diary.

*"At every moment you choose yourself. But do you choose *your* self? Body and soul contain a thousand possibilities out of which you can build many I's. But in only one of them is there a congruence of the [chosen and the chooser]. Only one – which you will never find until you have excluded all those superficial and fleeting possibilities of being and doing with which you toy, out of curiosity or wonder or greed, and which hinder you from casting anchor in the experience of the mystery of life, and the consciousness of the talent entrusted to you which is your I."*¹

For me, this means that every moment through our thoughts, words and actions we choose who we will be. We draw closer to God or stray further away. This work never happens in a vacuum. Sometimes I wonder if modern life makes this even more difficult.

Sarah Bakewell in a biography of Michel de Montaigne (1533-1592) complains, "The twenty-first century is full of people who are full of themselves. A half-hour's trawl through the online ocean of blogs, tweets, [YouTube videos, Facebook pages, etc.]... brings up thousands of individuals fascinated by their own personalities and shouting for attention. They go on about themselves; they diarize, and chat, and upload photographs of everything they do..."²

Personally, I cannot say for sure whether we are more self-absorbed than people in earlier generations. Technology and culture both have changed. We express ourselves differently. But our political discourse especially seems to lack humility. Perhaps it can be measured by how often the word "great" appears in advertisements, speeches, debates and tweets (for instance in the campaign slogan "Make America great again.")³

Paul Samuelson author of my first economics textbook wrote, "Never underestimate the willingness of a man to believe flattering things about himself." Indeed we are not the best judges of our own abilities. Surveys show that 90 percent of us describe ourselves as above-average drivers. It is astonishing how resistant to reality we can be. When asked the same question of drivers who were in the hospital recovering from accidents, 80 percent said they were above average.⁴

Humility makes anthropological sense. At some point, experience teaches every wise person that he or she is not as clever, attractive, kind, realistic, creative, loyal, reasonable, or just plain good, as we thought before. The motto of the Greek philosopher Socrates (470-399 BCE) is "Know thyself." But this is hard. His student

Plato writes that Socrates' exceptional wisdom came from understanding how little he knew. He was right to regard humility as the foundation for all knowledge.

But the Christian tradition values humility even more highly. Today I want to explore what humility means and why it has such importance for people of faith today.

In his life, Jesus exemplified extraordinary humility. He loved the people who came to him. His heart ached for the rich young ruler. He sympathized with the Roman centurion. He sought out foreigners, prostitutes and occupying army collaborators. His enemies chiefly criticized him for sharing meals with anyone – the most impure, immoral and outlandish, the freaks and the weirdo's. Today we believe that the presence of sinful people here this morning, praying together, sharing bread and wine, is one of the most powerful signs of God's kingdom.

At a chief religious leaders' house Jesus saw people scrambling for the best seats. He gives what sounds like practical advice. Sit in the lower seat and wait to be invited up. Don't get singled out for sitting above your station. "For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted" (Lk. 13).

But the point of this teaching extends far beyond seating arrangements. Jesus completely reverses everything we know about human interactions. He teaches that the future reward of dining with someone who could repay you later, is entirely eclipsed by the present delight of simply being with someone for their own sake.

The value of people is not what they might do for you some time off in the future. They are a gift just in themselves. The philosopher Immanuel Kant puts this in another way when he says that we need to treat others as ends in themselves rather than as a means to an end. The twentieth century thinker Martin Buber encourages to have "I-Thou" relationships "I-It" relations with other people.

This principle lies at the heart of our life together at Grace Cathedral. We deeply desire to be a house of prayer for all peoples. This week I spent an hour with Stuart, one of our yoga volunteers. We had a bond because at one time we had both worked for the same company. I have no idea what his experience of religion has been.

But I know a lot about his wonderful passion for Grace Cathedral. He said, "Malcolm, have you been to a meeting with our volunteer crew? They are the most amazingly diverse group. One clean shaven white guy is changing out of a business suit, talking to an Asian woman who has green hair and tattoos. They are young, old, straight, gay, African American, Korean, Buddhist, atheist, Christian, etc., ..." You get the idea.

Stuart told me about the best part of his week. Six hundred people practice yoga here and many start arriving early to get the best spots. But every day the team puts out a number of mats in the best location in the Cathedral at the very center of the labyrinth. As people come in it is obvious if they have never been here before. Stuart takes these newcomers, arriving late, and he puts them in the best spot in the house. He smiled at me and said, "imagine going to a rock concert and having them tear up your tickets to put you in the very first row."

Stuart's self totally disappeared. This is humility. When you are in the presence of someone with true humility you know it. The monk Curtis Almquist calls it, "a gift." It is, "the secret everyone knows about you but from which you are kept in the dark."⁵

For the opposite of humility Christians use the word pride. This is confusing because the word pride has other more common meanings. The word pride can describe the good feeling that we have when someone recognizes that we have done good work. We also use this word to express affection like when we say we are proud of our daughter, or proud to be a Golden Bear. These are not sins!

The sin of Pride means caring only about our own ego. It involves feeling better about ourselves at the expense of other people. Pride means having no room in our conscious life for anything but our own well-being. C. S. Lewis writes, "There is no fault which makes a man more unpopular, and no fault which we are more unconscious of in ourselves. And the more we have it ourselves, the more we dislike it in others... Pride is essentially competitive... As long as you are proud you cannot know God... Pride eats up the very possibility of love."⁶

According to much of Christian tradition pride is not merely a serious sin, but the most serious sin, the one that leads to other cruelty, betrayals, and lies that damage other people and the world. The great Sufi mystical poet Jalal ad-Din Rumi (1207-1273) writes, "The lovers of God have no religion but God alone."⁷ To be a lover of God our ego needs to stop being our religion. We have to learn to love ourselves and others in a new way.

Life has taught each of us to be an expert in forming judgments of other people. We have a sense for who we should trust, for when someone is not telling the truth, for boundaries that constrain what we do for each other. We have needed this skill to survive. But as a result we have also become quite judgmental of others. We can "see through" those who mean to do us harm.

But Jesus also invites us into a realm where we can "see into" those who cross our path. We can choose to see them as God does and to imagine their fears and dreams, the past that plagues them and the future they long for. This is the gift into which humility leads us.⁸ This is the grace of hospitality. Humility and hospitality are related.

I began with a quote from Dag Hammarskjöld. Let me conclude with another.

"To have humility is to experience reality, not in relation to ourselves, but in its sacred independence. It is to see, judge, and act from a point of rest in ourselves... In the point of rest at the center of our being, we encounter a world where all things are at rest in the same way. Then a tree becomes a mystery, a cloud a revelation, each [person] a cosmos of whose riches we can only catch glimpses. The life of simplicity... opens us to a book in which we never get beyond the first syllable."⁹

Over and over Jesus teaches that humility means making room for other people so that they can be themselves and not just what you want them to be. Humility is making room for God in your life.

What self will we choose? Will we become “great” scrambling for the best seat, so above average and full of ourselves that everyone around us cannot help but notice? Or like our brother Jesus will we delight in the presence of the person right in front of us.

Let’s make America humble again.

¹ Dag Hammarskjöld, *Markings* tr. Leif Sjöberg & W.H. Auden (NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1965), 19.

² Sarah Bakewell, *How to Live or A Life of Montaigne in One Questions and Twenty Attempts at an Answer* (NY: Other Press, 2010), 1.

³ As an experiment try opening up a candidate’s Twitter page and searching for the word “great.” It comes up a lot.

⁴ Robert H. Frank, “Just Deserts: Why We Tend to Exaggerate Merit – and Pay for Doing So,” *The Hedgehog Review*, Summer 2016, 54.

⁵ Curtis G. Almquist, *Unwrapping the Gifts: The Twelve Days of Christmas* (Lanham, MD: Cowley Publications, 2008), 59.

⁶ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (NY: Macmillan, 1943) 109-111.

⁷ Quoted in Dag Hammarskjöld, *Markings* tr. Leif Sjöberg & W.H. Auden (NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1965), 103.

⁸ I used to live near the Society of St. John the Evangelist monastery in Cambridge, Massachusetts and was often inspired by the monks there. This comes from Curtis Almquist, one of the Cowley Fathers there. Curtis G. Almquist, *Unwrapping the Gifts: The Twelve Days of Christmas* (Lanham, MD: Cowley Publications, 2008), 62.

⁹ Henry Pitney Van Dusen, *Hammarskjöld: A Biographical Interpretation of ‘Markings’* (London: Faber, 1967), 161.