

Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost, Sunday, September 1, 2019, Year C

St. Andrew's Anglican Church, Douglas, GA

The Rev. Fr. John E. Commins+ Rector

Scripture: Luke 14:1,7-15

“Humble Ourselves”

The word humility can strike a chord with many people – sometimes it is sweet and clear (like we heard on the organ this morning) and other times it sounds very sour and discordant. Having grown up in the 50's and 60's, I remember a young boxer named Cassius Clay – who later became known as Muhammad Ali. He would stand up during press conferences and even in the ring proclaiming himself as the prettiest, most handsome man – and screaming out “I am the greatest!” Ah, humility – he may have been a great fighter – but he certainly was not humble – by any stretch of the imagination. Humility does not let us think more of ourselves than we are truly worth. It does not allow us to become puffed up.

In today's Holy Gospel Jesus is talking about the way in which people of His day were throwing humility to the wind and jostling for position in the eyes of God. It appeared to Jesus that they were eager to push themselves forward, to show how well they were keeping the law, to maintain their own purity and piety. They were precisely the sort of people Jesus found Himself associating with – and THEY were the wrong kind of people! Jesus is focusing on touching the untouchable and calling the nobodies. This parable is everyday human wisdom - warning against pride and arrogance; warning against pushing yourself forward in the sight of Almighty God.

In Jesus' day, Jewish custom at a dinner was to arrange couches in a U shape with a low table in front of them. Guests reclined always on their left elbow, and they would be seated according to their status, with the place of honor being the seat at the center of the U. The farther away you were from that seat of honor – it meant that your status was lower. If people as they arrived placed themselves in the seats of honor, and then when someone more distinguished than them arrived, they would be asked to move to lower seats. By then, the only seat that would still be open would probably be the lowest place.

This wedding banquet that Jesus illustrates is a picture of the Messiah's kingdom. Those who seek honor for themselves will be ‘taken down a peg.’ Jesus explains that honor cannot be taken for yourself; it must be given by God. He will not honor those who seek to honor themselves!

My father used to say to me “SPS” – “Self Praise Stinks” and I have never forgotten that – some 60 or so years later – SPS.

Who are those arrogant people who exalt themselves? They are the ones who, in any group of people, would rather talk than listen, controlling the conversation with their own thoughts and ideas. It is funny – the more you minister – the more you learn to listen, and as Pastor Sam can tell you from his many years in ministry – sometimes we need to just ‘shut up’ and listen. Whatever you might have to say is less important to them than what they have to say. They keep cutting you off to get back to their ideas. They consistently think everyone else is far less

intelligent or important than they are. They treat people as inferior to them and so they are meant to serve only them.

I want to point to today's reading from Hebrews 13:1-18 in which treating people is at the very center of the lesson. Whether you might be entertaining angels without knowing it, or people who are in prison, people should be put ahead of you and your needs and wants. Society today loves to make jokes about marriage, just turn on the TV to a situational comedy – a sitcom, and people are making fun of their spouses – but the truth is when we get down to it - we must honor one another – not make fun of them. We need to look at them and the precious gift that they offer to us – and that is themselves. We must honor one another in any relationship. Vows and promises have been made to your beloved – and to almighty God – and you know how God views promises, vows and covenants. Putting others first is to humble yourself! It is important, showing some humility – saving 'you are important to me' and everything else doesn't matter.

It is unfortunate that some people try to show the appearance of humility – false humility -in order to manipulate others, while others think that humility means putting themselves down. Really humble people compare themselves only with Jesus Christ, realizing their sinfulness, and understand their limitations – and the huge gap that exists between them and Our Lord Jesus Christ. They also recognize their gifts and strengths and so are willing to use them as Christ leads them. Humility is not putting yourself down, it is not self-degradation and making fun of yourself; instead it is realistic assessment of yourself and a commitment to serve. In the 14 years that I have been a priest – I have found instances where poor self-image has been one of the major issues that people deal with. I will ask people if they liked themselves – and sadly the answer was usually no! God sees you as His precious creation, His child and that is not something to take lightly.

Throughout history, societies have had "status symbols" that helped people enhance and protect their standing in society. If you were blessed to be invited to the homes of the "in-crowd" and if you were seated in the "right places," then people would know just how important you seemed to be. The emphasis was on position and reputation, not sadly, on their character. It was more important for them to sit in the right places - than to live the right kind of life. Think of it as a giant "selfie" where posting your connections makes you look good. How many people today take pictures of themselves with well-known people or celebrities, just to be able to post it on Facebook and be able to say, "look at me – I am Sandra Dee." (You had to like "Grease" for that one.) Success that comes only from self-promotion is temporary, and you may be embarrassed as you are asked to move down. I remember the words of my father – "SPS."

When Jesus advised the guests to take the lowest places, He was not giving them a "ploy" that guaranteed position or promotion. The false humility that takes the lowest place is just as hateful to God as the pride that takes the highest place. God is not impressed by our status in society or in the church. He is not influenced one iota by what people say or think about us, because He sees the thoughts and motives of the heart. Just hear what God says in 1 Samuel 16:7 – "*Do not consider his appearance or his height, for I have rejected him. The LORD does*

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not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart.” God still humbles the proud and exalts the humble. The Lord reminds us in James 4:6 *“That is why Scripture says: “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.”*”

It has been said that humility is not thinking less of us, it is simply not thinking of ourselves at all. Jesus is the greatest example of humility, and we would do well to ask the Holy Spirit to enable us to imitate Him. Listen to these words of the Apostle Paul’s letter to the Philippians 2:3-11 in which he writes: *“Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death-- even death on a cross! Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”* Those are really powerful words!

Jesus knew that the host had invited those guests for two reasons:

- to pay them back because they had invited Him to past feasts, or
- to put them under His debt so that they would invite Him to future feasts or events.

The saying is “one hand washed the other.” This kind of hospitality was not an expression of love and grace but rather an evidence of pride and selfishness. He was "buying" recognition. In Jesus’ time it was not considered proper to ask poor people and handicapped people to public banquets, and the women, they weren’t invited at all! They served. But Jesus commanded to put these needy people at the top of our guest list *because they cannot pay us back*. If our hearts are right, God will see to it that we are properly rewarded, and getting a reward must not be the motive for our generosity. When we serve others from unselfish hearts, we are laying up treasures in heaven and becoming "rich toward God." Jesus said quite clearly, *“For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.”* (Luke 14:11)

Our world today is very competitive, and it is easy for God's people to become more concerned about profit and loss than they are about sacrifice and service. "What will *I* get out of it?" or even better – “What’s in it for *me*?” That might easily become someone’s most important question in their life. We have got to try to maintain the unselfish attitude that Jesus had and share what we have with others.

On the Day of Judgment, many who today are first in the eyes of men will be last in God's eyes, and many who are last in the eyes of men will be first in the eyes of God. How important it is for us to remember to humble ourselves.