

"Humble"

Luke 18:9-14

October 24, 2010

"Oh Lord, its hard to be humble." Do you remember that old Mac Davis song? "Oh Lord it's hard to be humble when you are perfect in every way!" {Sing it with me}

Feel good, doesn't it? It's always good to get a little pat on the back - even if you have to do it yourself.

Jesus tells another great parable. It is familiar enough that as soon as we begin to hear it read we know where it is going. Both a Pharisee and a tax collector go to the temple. The Pharisee stands by himself with an air of self importance and he prays loud and proud. His prayer asks nothing of God. His prayer simply reports his own greatness to God. If anything, the prayer is a statement of thankfulness for his own greatness and righteousness. "Oh lord, it's hard to be humble when you are perfect in every way!" We are quick to look down on the self righteousness of this man. But the reality is that he is the one that we would love to recruit as a member of the congregation. He is truly a good guy. He would probably be enlisted for serving on committees and council. He would probably be the first to volunteer to help with the annual Lutefisk supper - not to mention that it would be a real boost for the budget since he tithe not on his net income but on his gross income. What a guy!

But we know where the parable is going. We know that the tax collector is the one who is going to be praised. Of course we would not be nearly as excited to get a letter of transfer indicating that he wanted to join the congregation. He appears weak and dangerous - not at all the kind of person that we might want to recruit. Still as he beats his breast and prayers quietly in a corner for the mercy of God we know that it is this one that is the role model that is lifted up before us.

Unfortunately, we hear the parable - evaluate the two who have come to pray and end up saying; "I thank you God, that I am not like the Pharisee." Proud of our humility and equally as proud of the fact that we are not thieves, murders or tax collectors - we are just not too bad, and so we become the Pharisee.

Oh, Lord, it's hard to be humble Perhaps not perfect in every way But certainly good enough not to be humiliated.

It is an interesting parable. One that could certainly make us pause and wonder what it is that God is trying to say to us today. And in some ways we might be quick to say that the answer to that question is simple - be humble - live a life of humility. Be humble in your relationship to God. But be humble in your relationship with one another as well.

It seems to me important to note that we are called to humble lives in relationship to both God and our neighbor. In the parable the Pharisee quickly compares himself with others - noting their failures and his accomplishment. The tax collector looks at himself, sees his failures and compares himself only to the holiness of God. So often it seems as though we stand somewhere in between - comparing ourselves with the worst of our neighbors or the perceived failing of those around us we imagine that at least by comparison we must be good enough for God. But the call is simply to live humble Before God and one another.

It was interesting to read an article about humility this past week. In it the author said that: "The word "humility" comes from *humus*, meaning "soil." To have humility is to remember that your life is literally grounded in being a creature of the earth [we walk in the dirt]. There is a special blessing in understanding the honest truth about oneself. It's not that we are meant to pretend we are less than we are. Far from it! We are instead invited to consider ourselves in the company of all who are beloved of God, all who are inhabited by Christ's Holy Spirit."

I think of that great Ash Wednesday line "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return." Walking in the dust of the earth and the dirt of humanity we journey toward the God who created us. We are children of God Not god our self. We are children of God on a journey with the children of God. We fail ... They fail God has mercy. And so we continue on the journey always dependant on God and one another.

It is said that Alex Haley, the author of Roots, has a picture in his office, showing a turtle sitting atop a fence. The picture is there to remind him of a lesson he learned long ago: 'If you see a turtle on a fence post, you know he had some help.' So Mr. Haley says, 'Any time I start thinking, WOW, ISN'T THIS MARVELOUS WHAT I'VE DONE! I look at that picture and remember that this turtle--me-- did not get up on that post all by myself.' We are dust created by God to walk with each other toward Him.

It seemed interesting to connect our second lesson for today with this gospel parable. The Apostle Paul sits in prison awaiting trial that will most likely result in the ending of his life. And he writes to one who will carry one after he is gone. He reflects on his life and ministry as he approaches the end of his days. And though we would tend to list many accomplishments that Paul could have well bragged about, all he says is: "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith." If we want a model for understanding the parable that Jesus sets before us today in the gospel text, I think that we can find it in those words.

God has given us life and put us on the path that we are called to walk. It is in the dirt of the earth and sometimes it gets really dirty. But run the race run the race and look only to the glory of God as the guiding markers along the way.

There is a great story about a 42 year old woman by the name of Georgene Johnson. The story is that she ran a full marathon one day in Cleveland, Ohio. In and of itself, that is not much of a story. What makes it a great story is that she ran the marathon by accident. There was a group that lined up in one place for the 26 mile marathon and another group

that lined up nearby for a brief 10 K or 6.25 mile race. Georgene had trained for and intended to run the 6 mile race but she lined up with the wrong group. Somehow, when she hit the 4 mile mark in the race she figured out that she was with the wrong group but she just kept going. she kept going for the full 26 miles and finished the race in 4 hour and 4 minutes. The best part of the story came in an interview after the race when she explained, "**This isn't the race I trained for. This isn't the race I entered. But, for better or worse, this is the race I'm in.**"

It's not really so hard to be humble when we picture the turtle sitting on top of the fence post and remember all of those who have lifted us along the journey. It's not really so hard to be humble when you look down toward the finish line and see the glory of God in the face of our creator who looks at us with such love and mercy. And so we run in the dust ... running what ever race is set before us - running as children of God.

AMEN