

A Sermon for the Eleventh Sunday after Trinity Sunday, August 23, 2009

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“Every one that exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted” (from the gospel, Luke 18:9f.). This is not only the conclusion to our gospel parable; it is also a summary of the fall and redemption of humanity.

“Everyone who exalts himself will be humbled” describes the events of Genesis 3 and all who follow that pattern. The serpent told the first humans that they could be like God that they could lift themselves up. The result was humiliation: painful labor in childbirth, earning a living by the sweat of the brow, exile from the garden and God and, above all, death.

But he who humbled himself will be exalted. As we discussed last week in the feast of Mary, this is the theme of the Magnificat. “He hath exalted the humble and the meek.” Redemption begins when the humble respond to God’s word with faith after the pattern of Mary. And God exalts them.

It would be nice if that were the end of the story; if the humble were exalted and lived happily ever after in that elevated state. However, there is always that danger that those whom God has exalted will forget what God has done and begin to say, “Look at what I’ve done. Look at who I am.” Then, lifting themselves up, they again experience a fall.

The classic example of this is Israel in the Promised Land. In Deuteronomy, God warned them,

Beware that you do not forget the LORD your God by not keeping His commandments, His judgments, and His statutes...lest—when you have eaten and are full, and have built beautiful houses and dwell in them; and when your herds and your flocks multiply, and your silver and your gold are multiplied, and all that you have is multiplied; when your heart is lifted up, and you forget the LORD your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt...then you say in your heart, 'My power and the might of my hand have gained me this wealth.' (8:11-17).

Of course, they did forget, their hearts were lifted up, they exalted themselves and the result was that they were humbled by God in judgment as the nation went into exile in Babylon. Likewise, the history of the church provides too many examples of periods in which the church became proud of its status and wealth in the world, and was subjected to humbling discipline by God.

This is a perpetual temptation because it is the oldest. Isaiah 14 provides an allusion to the cosmic fall of Satan. “How you are fallen from heaven, O Day Star, son of Dawn...You said in your heart, I will ascend to heaven, above the stars of God...I will make myself like the Most High.” But you are brought down to Sheol, to the farthest reaches of the pit.”

Today’s epistle (1 Corinthians 15:1f.) connects with the gospel because St. Paul was a Pharisee who became a humble man. In fact, St. Paul might have been the model for the Pharisee in the parable. However, in the epistle, after he saw Jesus on the road to Damascus, he sounds more like the publican “Last of all [Christ] was seen of me also, as of one born out of due time. For I am the least of the apostles, that am not meet to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God.”

Now, St. Paul's new assessment was not simply the idea that before he thought he was really hot stuff but now he realized he was utterly worthless. What Paul discovered on the Damascus road was a new standard of self-evaluation. The Pharisee in the parable compared himself to others. But Paul began to assess himself in the new light of the risen and glorified Lord Jesus.

When we evaluate ourselves in the light of the presence of Jesus, we discover at least two things. We do, indeed, discover our unworthiness. The holiness of Jesus reveals to us our sin by contrast. We see how silly it is to think that our good works or religious practices can earn us any standing with God. We realize that we can only enter into the presence of Jesus by grace.

However, in the light of the presence of Jesus, we also discover that we have value. We discover that God loves us, not because of what we have done or not done, but because of who we are. He values us because he made us in his image and is recreating us in the image of Christ. We discover that God has given us gifts and called us to do good works in his name.

The humble person, the one who finds his value "in Christ," does not lack self-esteem. He knows the gifts God has given him and is confident in his ability to use them. Paul thought he did a pretty good job as an apostle. As he said, "By God's grace I am what I am: and his grace was not in vain; but I labored more abundantly than they all; yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me."

A certain quiet confidence is a necessary part of humility. Sometimes what we think of as humility is really a kind of negative pride. Whereas the Pharisee compared himself favorably with the publican, we might compare ourselves unfavorably with someone who is more accomplished, attractive, talented or wealthy than we are. As a result we might think lowly of ourselves. This is not humility. This is wounded pride.

The point is not how we compare, but that we compare at all. For God didn't make us to have more value or less value than someone else. He made us to have intrinsic value as who we are. We discover, and remember, our intrinsic value "in Christ" through prayer. We can only maintain a confident humility by keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus. Every time our eyes wander into comparison, the ugliness and falseness of pride creeps in. We lift ourselves up and are in danger of falling.

This is why Jesus said to "Do this in remembrance of me." In word and sacrament, Jesus comes to us and we come to Jesus. In that encounter, we remember that we are sinners in need of mercy and forgiveness. But we also remember that Jesus gave himself to save us. We remember that we have been given gifts to use and work to do. We remember that God has lifted us up to serve him.

The only certain antidote for pride is to come back, again and again, into the presence of Jesus. When we see the crucified and risen Christ as he is, we see ourselves as we are. He is the true measure of our value. When we keep our eyes on Jesus, we learn to say, with Paul, "By God's grace I am what I am." And we work to make sure that his grace is not in vain. We labor abundantly to do the good works he has prepared for us, remembering, always, that it is "not I, but the grace of God that [is] with me."

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