



“Those Who Humble Themselves Will Be Exalted”
Sermon Preached by Gregory Knox Jones
August 29, 2010
Luke 14:1, 7-14

A colleague received a gift from a friend, a book of insults. He and his friend enjoy good-natured banter and humorous put-downs, so the friend figured he would enjoy reading about famous and not so famous insults.

As he browsed the index, he was struck by the fact that most of the entries were from 19th and 20th century Great Britain. No explanation was given, but it was likely because English society in that era had such a rigid system of social distinctions. Each person had a place in the hierarchy and knew where he/she stood in relation to others. When such a caste system holds sway, people are bound to poke fun at it. One way of doing it is with put-downs that humble the proud and knock the mighty off their seats.

If you were putting together an insulters all-star team, you would have to include George Bernard Shaw and Winston Churchill. When it comes to acerbic wit, they were in a league of their own. Once, Shaw was invited to a tea by a woman who had a reputation as a social climber. She was constantly finding ways to hobnob with celebrities so that she could drop their names in conversations. Hoping to add Shaw to her list of friends, she sent him her card. It read: “Lady (McBride) will be at home Thursday between 4:00 and 6:00.” Shaw returned her card with this notation: “Mr. Bernard Shaw, likewise.”

The book includes the famous exchange between Churchill and Lady Astor who said, “Mr. Churchill, if I were your wife I’d poison your tea!” To which he replied, “Madame, if I were your husband, I would drink it!”

Shaw and Churchill even did a little jousting with each other. When Shaw was opening a new play, he sent two tickets to Churchill and slipped in this note: “Here are two tickets for the opening night of my new play; one for you and one for a friend, if you have one.” Churchill returned the tickets to Shaw with his own note: “I cannot attend the opening night. Please send two tickets for the next night, if there is one.”¹

These two enjoyed poking fun at each another and many of us engage in similar ribbing. Much of the time the put-downs are simply playful jabs with a friend. However, sometimes, our words produce a real sting. Why do we turn to insults as a mode of communication?

I suspect it is because on some level, we are concerned about our status. We worry about where we rank in relation to others. “Am I on the same level as this person, or is she a notch above me?” We try to build a case for why people should think highly of us, dropping little hints

about our work, our education, our club. We may resort to insults to try to knock others down a few pegs on the ladder.

Today's passage from Luke shines the spotlight on status seeking and prompts us to ponder our efforts at social climbing. Jesus has been invited to dine at the home of a prominent man who is hosting a gathering of prestigious individuals. Jesus does not usually spend time with such notables. He prefers to seek out those who have little standing in the community and who are never included on anyone's guest list. Why Jesus has been invited to this exclusive gathering is unclear, but we suspect it is because the movers and shakers of this community want to check him out. If they have caught wind of his teachings, they realize that he could undermine the status quo, which would send tremors of fear through those who have put great effort into raising their ranking in the eyes of others.

As the guests gather, Jesus cannot help but notice the way each one jockey for position. People are elbowing one another for prestigious seats, so Jesus seizes this teaching moment to tell a parable. He says, "When you are invited to a banquet, don't grab the place of honor. Someone more important than you might show up and in front of everyone, the host will ask you to move down a few seats. Instead, when you arrive, sit down at the lowest place, so that the host may say to you, "Friend, please move up higher." Jesus sums up his brief parable, saying, "All who exalt themselves will be humbled, but those who humble themselves will be exalted."

In our narcissistic culture where we are constantly encouraged to promote ourselves, the words of Jesus drop like a thud. Words about humility sound so yesterday in a society where people will do practically anything to draw attention to themselves. Yet, Jesus counters extreme individualism because he knows that when we are full of ourselves, we cannot be full of God.

Seminary professor, Jeremy Begbie, is still pestered by a note he received a couple of years ago. He was a guest preacher one Sunday morning and following the service, the resident minister slipped him a note. The note contained only four words, but two of them left the professor perplexed. It read: "Great sermon. Keep humble."

Begbie found the note puzzling. He wondered if the pastor meant, "Preserve that humble spirit you possess" or "You seem a bit full of yourself. Next time try not to use up all of the oxygen in the room!"

As the professor gathered his things and walked away from the church, the words "Keep humble" kept tumbling over in his mind. He became self-conscious of the way he was walking, the expression on his face and the tone of his voice. Would someone think he was a bit arrogant? "Keep humble." What were those words supposed to mean?²

Humility is often misunderstood in a society where many are more interested in garnering personal recognition than generating positive results. Humility does not mean self-hatred or thinking poorly of yourself. Becoming humble does not mean allowing others to pound you into the ground and to take advantage of you. A humble person does not reject all words of praise while clinging to every criticism. Counter to what some Christian fundamentalists preach, it does not mean seeing yourself as a worthless sinner. That would be to forget that we are created in God's image.

Humility is a vital spiritual virtue but a tricky one, because some believe it means to have a negative self image. Others adopt a *false* humility. False humility is a strategy for eliciting praise from others. I deprecate my gifts and I belittle my accomplishments for the purpose of reaping your esteem. Of course, once I garner your praise, it puffs me up inside which leads to the very opposite of humility. In fact, false humility is so rampant and genuine humility so

elusive, that some assert that all humility is false humility. Jesus disagrees; he says it is a virtue. However, when he encourages us to be humble, what exactly does he have in mind?

For one, he knows our lives will be richer once we realize that life is not *all about me*. He urges us to reject extreme individualism and to recognize that we exist in an interdependent world. We are only partially responsible for the person we have become. God has given us life and health, a mind and opportunities. Parents have cared for us, taught us and supported us. Teachers have opened new worlds to us. Coaches have challenged us to reach levels we believed were unattainable. Loved ones have helped shoulder our burdens and boost our confidence. A humble person understands that there is no such thing as a self-made person. And that is something to celebrate because it enables us to go through life with a grateful heart for all that God and others have done for us.

People who are humble are also devoid of envy. They are happy when good fortune comes to others. In his book, *Screwtape Letters*, C. S. Lewis defines true humility as “the ability to take joy in one’s own accomplishments, but without taking any more joy than if someone else had those same accomplishments.” Parents take great joy in the accomplishments of their children. People who are humble are able to be equally as enthusiastic in the accomplishments of other people’s children.

One of the most attractive things about humble people is that they do not have to act as if they have an answer to every question. They can be open to new thoughts and new discoveries. Physician and author, Rachel Naomi Remen writes, “The most important questions don’t seem to have ready answers. (In some cases) an answer is an invitation to stop thinking about something, to stop wondering.”³ Humble people recognize the limits of knowledge and they are open to mystery. They feel no qualms about admitting their knowledge is limited and fallible, and they do not feel compelled to try to bluff their way through a discussion.

Remen goes on to say, “In some fairytales, there is a magic word which has the power to undo the spell that has imprisoned someone and free them. When I was small, I would wait anxiously until the prince or the princess stumbled on the formula and said the healing words that would release them into life. Usually the words were some sort of nonsense like ‘Shazam.’ My magic words have turned out to be ‘I don’t know.’⁴

Finally, a humble person is freed from constantly competing with others for recognition because a humble person understands that we do not establish our self worth through our successes. Our worth, like life itself, is a gift. We come from God, we live in God and we return to God. No number of triumphs will fulfill our ego needs if we do not understand that God loves us and embraces us as a special person with unique gifts who has a unique mission to fulfill.

Professor Begbie says that when he “gets caught up in his most self-defensive moods, he has a vision of an old man in some dusty attic on the outskirts of hell, counting obsessively all the meaningless little victories he won in his life, writing a sort of eternal memoir for no one but himself. In the murky darkness, he pours over all the times he kept his image intact and won the arguments and preserved his reputation and successfully defended his name. While outside, the humble dance in the sunshine, reveling in abundant life.”⁵

They are dancing because they are freed from having to scale some contrived ladder of success, freed from having to elbow others in order to gain places of honor and freed from worrying about how many achievements are necessary to gain respect. They are dancing because they are confident in the knowledge that God is so crazy about them that there will always be a special seat for them at the table. May each of us put aside hubris and put on humility so that we can be among those who dance.

NOTES

1. Methodist minister, Mark Trotter, shared this story.
2. Jeremy Begbie, "Keep Humble," on the *Faith and Leadership* website, March 3, 2009.
3. From an interview of Rachel Naomi Remen by Krista Tippett on *Speaking of Faith*, July 29, 2010.
4. Ibid.
5. Jeremy Begbie, "Keep Humble."