



ST STEPHEN'S ANGLICAN CHURCH

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The Seventeenth Sunday After Trinity, September 27th 2015

“But when thou art bidden, go and sit down in the lowest place; that when he that bade thee cometh, he may say unto thee, Friend, go up higher: then shalt thou have worship in the presence of them that sit at meat with thee. For whosoever exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted.”

✠ In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. AMEN ✠

If you survey the average American Christian, you learn something rather amazing about Jesus Christ: He agrees almost entirely with everything that person thinks. Regardless of that person's political party, gender, views on the environment, or particular (or dare I say peculiar) views on Christian doctrine and practice, Jesus definitely agrees with them. The fact is, I've never heard a Christian say “well, I know quite well that Jesus *disagrees* with me on this, and I'm good with that.” No, Jesus the ever-affable Messiah always agrees with us and is more than happy to validate whatever we think.

The liberals and the conservatives and the socialists and the libertarians and all the rest will all tell you with no sense of irony that Jesus believes absolutely and without exception what they believe; and by virtue of that, you should as well. And if you don't, you're obviously as dottie as a doorknob.

And because Jesus agrees with us, we often find it quite easy to get a bit puffed up. I mean, it's rather hard to not get at least a little full of yourself when the Son of God has your back, is it not? And hey, since we're on the right team, we've earned the privilege of being at least a little self-satisfied, right?

I'm joking of course, but looking at the landscape of America today, indeed for the last hundred years, you wouldn't be surprised to find

people who really held such thoughts as a matter of personal doctrine. We see it in the way we treat each other, and in the way we treat non-Christians. It's not a new problem, of course. We've often joked that Saint Jerome, born in 347 AD, is the “patron saint of rude letter writers,” because he just couldn't keep his temper when arguing doctrine with other Christians by post. Thank goodness he didn't have Facebook in the fourth century, as we've merely used as a tool to turn “If God be for us, who can be against us” to “If God be for us, we should call everybody else an idiot on the internet.”

The fact is, the ease with which we can become prideful is a problem for practically all people of faith. And that's precisely why Jesus is so intent on warning us against it. A few weeks ago on Trinity 11 the Gospel reading focused on Jesus's parable of the publican and the Pharisee. In that, Jesus showed us that a contrite heart before God could leave a person justified, while a prideful heart left a person separated from God. In this parable however, Jesus makes it clear that not only can we not be prideful before Almighty God, but we can also not be prideful among our peers, or even those whom we may not even view as such.

But why? What is Jesus's purpose with these repeated parables and admonitions throughout Scripture about humility? These two parables

aren't nearly the summary of all Jesus had to say about humility; don't forget that the apostles themselves were told by Jesus to stop jockeying for position in His kingdom. Jesus has a dogged determination in making anybody who would follow Him understand that humility is not just a virtue, but a requirement. So the question is: why? Certainly it's not just for the sake of good manners or proper conduct; after all, society tells us that pride is good. In the world today, *pride* is a virtue, not humility. We are told by the media and by the world that we should be proud of anything we do and anything we are, so it's not as though Jesus is saving us from scandal by telling us to be humble. If anything, we look out of place when we're NOT prideful.

One big reason Jesus makes humility a requirement for those who would follow Him is because He was humble, and we are called to be as Christlike as possible. As Christians, we obviously don't view Jesus merely as a good teacher, but as God incarnate. So if God humbles Himself to join us in the person of Jesus Christ, how dare any of us exalt himself? He who is to be exalted above all others in the universe humbled Himself in the most extreme way possible. He humbled Himself to join us in the flesh, and to be born of a humble estate. He humbled Himself to join us in hunger, in thirst, and in temptation. He humbled Himself to the grave; to join us in our most debased state - the state of death. The Author of life humbled Himself to the point of experiencing, if only for three days, the human event of death.

There is no greater example of humility in all of history, than the humility displayed by God when the separation of the divine and the mortal was bridged by Jesus. If God can be humble and we cannot, what does that say about us? And where does that leave us in our relationship to our Creator, in our sanctification and justification? If we cannot humble ourselves, we cannot draw near to a God who humbled Himself for us.

Another key reason Jesus commands us to be humble is that He has told us to go and make disciples of all nations. We can't do that if we're not married to humility. The unsaved can't see Christ in us if our own pride blocks that out. How can we expect an unbelieving world to

see Jesus Christ the most humble when His body on earth is prideful? Our pride doesn't just make us anathema to God, it can actually be part of the catalyst of other souls going lost. We cannot be an effective witness for Jesus Christ, God who humbled Himself in the ultimate way, if our witness is clouded by pride. It's like trying to tell the world to eat healthy with a fried Snickers bar in your hand. It's telling the unsaved that they need to call on the name of Christ to wash away their sins, while admitting quite loudly that we don't care enough about what He had to say, to actually follow it ourselves. To be prideful for Christ is to miss the point of what He was saying.

Our pride to other people doesn't just make us ugly to others; it makes us ugly to God. And it helps create more lost souls, and puts their blood on our hands. Jesus desires us to be humble both for our own justification, and for the eventual justification of others brought about our credible witness to Him. Humility for the sake of the Gospel doesn't just help us appear nice; it lets the lost see God in our eyes and hear Him in our words.

We have been given an amazing gift by a loving God - the invitation to faith. I am regularly being told by friends "Mike, I envy you. You have this whole 'faith' thing, and it seems like it does really great things for people who believe. And I've given religion a shot, but I just don't believe." And in the overwhelming majority of cases, they're not pandering to me, they really mean it. So how can we, who are unworthy of this gift, dare be prideful in front of people who have not, for whatever reason, received that gift? Or far more often than that, saw the gift on the doorstep, wrote "return to sender" on it, and are now hoping it comes around once again?

The great commission is to every single one of us, and it's not to be taken lightly. If we can clothe ourselves in Christlike humility, we can not only work together as brothers and sisters without quarrel, we can work effectively in a world that has forgotten that meekness and humility are to be valued and that humbleness is a trait of God; and we can provide a credible witness for a God so willing to be humble, He became one of us. *Amen*