

Trinity Eleven Summer 2017

Jesus said:” Anyone who exalts himself shall be abased; and he that humbles himself shall be exalted.” The word abase means discredited or humiliated. Exalted means to be praised. God loves the humble person and shall be exalted in heaven. On the other hand, anyone who seeks praise now, often artificial in truth, will not be praised in heaven but degraded.

Saint James writes: “Come close to God, and God will come close to you. Wash your hands of your sins and purify your hearts for your loyalty is divided between God and the world.” *Washing the hands is symbolic of washing and purifying our inner intentions and imperfections.* “Let there be tears for what you have done,” he continues, “Let there be sorrow and deep grief. Let there be sadness instead of laughter and gloom instead of joy. Humble yourselves before the Lord and he will lift you up in honor.”

Saint James advises us to be humble. He is merely repeating the words of Christ. The humble person is one who acknowledges his unworthiness before God and exercises deep regret for his wrongful conduct. This takes courage, prompting Saint Francis De Sale to say real strength lies in the virtue of humility. It takes courage to stand up for what one knows is right and defend it. It takes courage to open one’s heart and thoroughly confess his sins before almighty God. In short, it takes backbone to be a Christian. Total humility before God is the basis of all prayer and the answer to those who say God doesn’t answer my prayers. The key is how he is approached.

There is a powerful scene in the film *The Passion of Christ*. The camera focuses on the sandaled feet of Jesus. A hand emerges along the ground and moves slowly towards his feet. The image that comes to mind is that the person who belongs to the hand is approaching God with fear and trembling. This would be wrong. Soon the head of a woman moves into the camera's view. The hand is hers and she is crawling towards Christ on her knees bent over at the waist, with her face almost touching the ground. She is Mary Magdalene.

Although forgiven by Christ, she is approaching him with her own sense of unworthiness, hoping merely to touch the sole of one of his sandals. It is a very moving scene and a graphic portrayal of the words "We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under thy table, but thou art the same lord whose property is to always have mercy." (BCP pg82; Prayer of Humble Access.) These words come from the Syrophoenician woman crawling towards Jesus, too weak to stand from a devastating blood disease, seeking only to touch the hem of his robe, so that he may notice her. When he acknowledges her, she tells him she isn't worthy to eat the crumbs from her master's table but he need only to say the word and she would be healed. Here we have in this woman the three aspects of effective prayer: Humility which drives courage and begets faith. The centurion is yet another example. He was not even a practicing Jew. "I am not worthy that you should come under the roof of my home," he said. "But my servant is very sick and I know you can heal him." His servant was healed that very moment. Bartimaeus the blind beggar is another case in point. He even discarded his clothes which were torn and tattered rags to make himself

somewhat presentable before Jesus whom he knew was the messiah. Doing so was considered a sign of deep humility. His sight was restored to him.

When approaching God in prayer we should all do so as Saint Francis De Sale did. He referred to God as “Your Majesty.” None of us are worthy to unloose his sandals or eat the crumbs that fall from his table. Yet, he is the God who loves us unconditionally, no matter what we do.

Saint Catherine of Siena, the Italian Mystic from Tuscany lived in the fourteenth century. She is only one of two woman who were given the title “Doctor of the Church.” This title is given to those whose teaching made its mark on the formation and development of Church Doctrine. Doctrine means teaching. There are countless books detailing what Catherine saw and experienced. Jesus Christ appeared before her in visions and she was given the stigmata, the wounds of Christ. Jesus came to her while she was praying and said “Do you know daughter, who you are, and who I am? If you know these two things you will be blessed. You are she who is not; whereas I am he who is. Have this knowledge in your soul and the enemy (Satan) will never deceive you and you will escape all his wiles (devious tricks); you will never disobey my commandments and will acquire all grace, truth and light.”

In essence, the vision informs us we are nothing before God who is everything. As He once told Moses who he is: “Tell the people I Am.” Remember the words of Christ in Saint John’s Gospel narrative: “I am the vine and you are the branches. He that abides in me and I in him will bear much fruit; for without

me you can do nothing.” John 15:5. “God alone,” said Catherine, “is the source of all being.” Therefore, it follows that we originate from him as the creator of all there is. Without him we do not exist.” Before we can know God, we must understand this about ourselves. It is not meant to be cruel or demeaning, rather it conveys our true source of being. We were made by God and for God, apart from him we can only get into trouble. This is precisely what Saint Augustine meant nine hundred years before Catherine, in the words: “Our hearts are restless O lord, until they rest in you.” If we rid ourselves of our faults and our learned bad habits then God can work through us and fashion us into what and who he knows we can be. Then we are something. Facts of his Grace, evidence of his reality.

The publican in today’s Gospel reading is all these things. He is filled with humility, light and grace. His very attitude bespeaks a person who acknowledges his unworthiness. He is the epitome of the wise words: “know thyself and know God.” It is certain the people there laughed at him, but he had the guts to stand there before God as a humble penitent, asking God’s mercy. Notice he doesn’t ask for anything but forgiveness. Take special notice. If we go before God and start asking for stuff without begging his forgiveness and confessing our sins we won’t get very far with our requests. Here is the reason why many say God doesn’t answer their prayers. Make this publican their model.

If we truly look deep into ourselves we find that all of us fall short of the Glory of God. He doesn't need us; we need him. This is the first step to personally experiencing God. The publican is a penitent of the first order. Head bowed, begging God's forgiveness. He knows he is a sinner subject to conducting himself in ways that displeases God. He stands before God in full acknowledgement of his short-comings. Jesus mentions that it is this attitude that justified him, meaning he made himself righteous before God. If we do not come before God knowing that we are not really worthy of his attention then we deceive ourselves and add the sin of pride, the opposite of humility, to our list of misdeeds. The longer that list gets the further away from God one gets. Of course, he won't answer the prayers of someone with that attitude. The Scriptures say as much: "The Lord is far from the sinner but he answers the prayers of the righteous." Proverbs 15:29.

We are living in a full deceit mode at present. Lies have no inherent power, only the power given to them by willfully believing them for self-serving purposes. Our culture has been conditioned to compartmentalize reality and place it in a drawer thrusting it deep into the recesses of our subconscious, hoping never to be recognized again, believing what they prefer to be true. This is the sole reason why many leave the church; they have bought into the false ideologies of secularism. But reality surfaces nevertheless. It prods and provokes. This is the voice of God.

Some will attempt to smother it once again with drink, drugs and reckless behavior. All this accomplishes is more self-destruction. Reality is a fact and facts are stubborn things; they never go away.

On the other hand, there is the Pharisee, a “man of God.” He is boastful, proud and very pleased with himself; but is he really? Is he trying to prove something to himself? People who live with rejection often crave acceptance. Is the Pharisee one of these? We don’t know. What we can conclude is he is a performance artist. His very words ring with self-aggrandizement. He is exalting himself. The performance, is all about him.

If he had an audience that day and they urged him on doing so served one purpose and one purpose only: they were enabling him to live out his lie.

This is the purpose of false ideology.

Humility is not low self-esteem, as some wrongly think, neither is it self-denigration. Would you be surprised if I told you psychologists will tell you that people who practice humility do better academically, make excellent leaders, have self-respect and are respected by others. A humble person is someone who has accomplished much and possesses many gifts and talents but keeps them in proper perspective; unlike the Pharisee, he doesn’t brag about them.

Jesus practiced humility; he washed his apostle’s feet. We are all servants of God. The key to obtaining his guidance and the Joy of being a Christian and all our needs, not what we want, but what God knows we need, is humility.

