

EPIPHANY 3 SUNDAY

January 23, 2022

Organ Prelude: Arrival of the Queen of Sheba

G. F. Handel

Welcome, Announcements & Worship Theme

CALL TO WORSHIP:

“All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.” (Luke 14:11)

We live in a world where exalting ourselves is how we succeed and get ahead. We live in a world where being great is honoured more than being humble, being recognized for one’s accomplishments is more special than rejoicing in the accomplishments of others.

We come to worship to get grounded again in our true measure as human beings and a truer foundation for our sense of worth and identity than what we are fed in our worldly diet.

We come to rediscover a fullness in life rooted in faith, hope and love, and in a humility of service, gratitude and the appreciation of all good things in life as gifts rather than entitlements.

Let us worship God together!

Hymn: God of the sparrow, God of the whale

No. 307

1. God of the sparrow

God of the whale

God of the swirling stars

How does the creature say Awe

How does the creature say Praise

2. God of the earthquake

God of the storm

God of the trumpet blast

How does the creature cry Woe

How does the creature cry Save

3. God of the rainbow
God of the cross
God of the empty grave
How does the creature say Grace
How does the creature say Thanks

5. God of the neighbour
God of the foe
God of the pruning hook
How does the creature say Love
How does the creature say Peace

4. God of the hungry
God of the sick
God of the prodigal
How does the creature say Care
How does the creature say Life

6. God of the ages
God near at hand
God of the loving heart
How do your children say Joy
How do your children say Home

Prayer of Approach, Confession & The Lord's Prayer

**Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name;
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven;
Give us this day our daily bread;
And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us;
And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil;
For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory, forever. Amen.**

The Peace of Christ be with you all;
And also with you.

Children's Theme

Special Music: I'll walk with God

words: P. F. Webster; music N. Brodsky

soloist Erin Stone

Scripture Readings: Luke 14: 7-11; 22: 24-27; 18: 15-17

Luke 14: 7-11

7 When he noticed how the guests chose the places of honour, he told them a parable. ⁸“When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not sit down at the place of honour, in case someone more distinguished than you has been invited by your host; ⁹and the host who invited both of you may come and say to you, “Give this person your place”, and then in disgrace you would start to take the lowest place. ¹⁰But when you are invited, go and sit down at the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he may say to you, “Friend, move up higher”; then you will be honoured in the presence of all who sit at the table with you. ¹¹For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.’ Amen.

Luke 22: 24-27

24 A dispute also arose among them as to which one of them was to be regarded as the greatest. ²⁵But he said to them, 'The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those in authority over them are called benefactors. ²⁶But not so with you; rather the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like one who serves. ²⁷For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one at the table? But I am among you as one who serves. Amen.

Luke 18: 15-17

15 People were bringing even infants to him that he might touch them; and when the disciples saw it, they sternly ordered them not to do it. ¹⁶But Jesus called for them and said, 'Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. ¹⁷Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.' Amen.

We are listening, O God;

Speak to us!

Sermon:

TWO KINDS OF HUMILITY

Dr. Harris

(Full sermon can be found at the end of the bulletin)

Special Music: Where are the children

words and music: Bruce Nasmith

soloists Erin Stone, Chris Tanaka-Mann & Bruce Nasmith

Prayers of Thanksgiving & Pastoral Concern

Hymn: Lord of all power

No. 626

1. Lord of all power, I give you my will,
in joyful obedience
your tasks to fulfil.
Your bondage is freedom,
your service is song,
and, held in your keeping,
my weakness is strong.

3. Lord of all bounty, I give you my heart;
I praise and adore you
for all you impart:
your love to inspire me,
your counsel to guide,
your presence to cheer me,
whatever betide.

2. Lord of all wisdom, I give you my mind,
rich truth that surpasses
our knowledge to find.
What eye has not seen
and what ear has not heard
is taught by your Spirit
and shines from your word.

4. Lord of all being, I give you my all.
If e'er I disown you,
I stumble and fall,
but, sworn in glad service
your word to obey,
I walk in your freedom
to the end of the way.

Benediction

Threefold Amen

Organ postlude: Fugue in F major

J. S. Bach

TWO KINDS OF HUMILITY

Luke 14: 7-11; 22: 24-27; 18: 15-17

I hadn't known them before they called me. They were planning to get married and wanted to do it in a church. Would I consider marrying them? "I'd be open to that," I said, "but why don't we meet to discuss this in my office." And so they came. Sidney was an older man and Jackie seemed considerably younger. Jackie also brought her teenage son along with her. His name was Remi. They were very nice and all, but very soon in our conversation I got an uneasy feeling. Sidney took the lead and seemed to be doing all the talking. But rather than talk about the wedding and the details involved, he talked about himself. He had lots to say. He had been a bachelor much of his life, and had met Jackie at a party. Eventually he found out she had a child and the child's father had disappeared many years back. Jackie had rebuilt her life as a single parent and was totally devoted to Remi. Sidney seemed to be portraying himself as some kind of rescuer. He had provided a home to replace the small apartment Jackie and Remi had lived in. Sidney was also paying for Remi to attend a private school. Besides being a provider, Sidney told me about his academic accomplishments, the important people he knew and the many ways it was clear that he was a successful man in every way. Wow! Wouldn't we all want to be Sidney! Pat him on the back and give him a medal please!

So how was Jackie with all this? Well, she was glad to be quiet and listened with what seemed to me admiration for Sidney. He was a good man, a kind man, and he had provided an open door to Jackie and Remi. She was glad to care for him. She was working but had also started course work in a college program with Sidney's support. Even though he seemed to me to be pretty patronizing, Jackie smiled with love and respect whenever he talked. Was this servility or humility? Was Jackie just accepting her need and putting up with being treated like a daughter, in effect, or was she truly and genuinely happy to admire someone she also loved? I wasn't sure. I had to take it all at face value.

And then there was Remi. He was even more fascinating to me. I didn't know what I was expecting, maybe a teenage boy resentful of his mom's choices or mistakes. But there was no rolling of the eyes when Sidney spoke, no put down of his mother the few times she spoke. Rather Remi was a young man full of wonder, trust, openness and curiosity. He was interested in what I did and how church worked. He was engaged in our conversation. He had a child-like hunger to learn and understand without any hint of being bored or disinterested. Quite the opposite in fact. What a gift he must have been to his mother, and what good fortune for someone like Sidney who could easily put people off with his self-adulation. Remi was simply going to soak up all that was good and all there was to learn from Sidney and he was full of nothing but love and respect for his mother Jackie. Amazing!

There was a small gathering for the wedding – some family and friends. I lost touch with them after a while. But I still think about them, especially Remi. What I see in Jackie and Remi in particular are two different kinds of humility in a world where people are taught to aspire to become Sidneys – full of themselves, their goodness, their importance, their success. In a world where everyone is taught to focus on themselves and how great they are, we are taught to distrust the authenticity of anyone who defers to others, anyone who gives way in a conversation and focus to others, anyone who is full of wonder and curiosity in learning about someone or something else and listening rather than giving their own opinion on everything.

So what can we learn about humility in a world of self-promotion? Let's dive into our scripture reading in search of revelatory wisdom.

Our first two readings point to the kind of humility I discerned in someone like Jackie. She was deferential to someone like Sidney. She didn't have some exalted view of herself. She was content with her place in the relationship. She was also thriving in a relationship situation where she could serve. Being a servant was not demeaning. It was a way to give, to care and to offer the best of yourself to the world beginning with the people in your own life. But Jesus also has something to say toward this kind of humility. Jesus doesn't accept the world as it is. In our first reading he is at a dinner party. He notices where everyone sits. Where you are seated speaks to how important you are in relationship to the host who has invited you. Status is everything in that world. Your importance is based on things like your accomplishments, your money, your success and how others perceive your goodness, respectability and social influence.

But Jesus doesn't just say that you should know your place. No. He also offers some advice and some strategy for how to live in such a world of inequality. First, he says, beware of having too exalted a view of yourself. Beware of being someone like Sidney. Even if in your particular world you are someone important, and even if that fills you up with some exalted view of yourself, this is purely a social construct. There's only one-way things can go at some point and that is downward. "All who exalt themselves will be humbled", declares Jesus. Whether you humble yourself now or circumstances of your health, wealth, relationships or some other factor you cannot control or make as you want will do it someday, you are vulnerable to a fall more than you can imagine in your deluded, narcissistic grandiosity.

In contrast, those who have a more measured view of themselves and their importance, will often experience any honour or recognition as a gift rather than a privilege or right. We live in a world where people are taught that they are super special. That's what our children are told every day if they are loved and cherished. But sometimes, that can lead to ingratitude and a lack of a healthy humility. Life is so much richer when we experience all we receive as gifts for which humble gratitude is the response rather than entitlement and expectation. "Those who humble themselves will be exalted", declares Jesus.

In our second reading, however, Jesus takes it even further. He condemns the Sidneys of the world when they not only exalt themselves before all those around them, but also, in Jesus' words, when they "lord it over them" as "benefactors." In other words, they see themselves as so essential to the welfare of those around them. Sidney was a benefactor of Jackie and Remi and that could only inflate his exalted view of himself. Isn't he so great! But Jesus contrasts this view of greatness with the greatness of being a servant. A servant cares and a servant gives out of a heart that is authentic love and care. What a servant receives back in terms of the well-being of those served and any gratitude and appreciation expressed, are all the gifts they need to feel fulfilled and special. According to Jesus, the way of the servant is the way to true greatness and this is the kind of God he has come to embody. If God is truly love than such love comes alive in those who serve not those who see themselves as benefactors. How is what you offer of yourself service rather than benefaction? Do you see humility as servility or do you see it as something to aspire to live into in order to truly experience the fullness of gratitude for how everything good in life is a gift? When we are so busy exalting ourselves we will end up feeling empty because we can never exalt ourselves enough to feel blessed. Only as we receive all of life as a gift in humble gratitude do we feel an overflowing fullness.

And this brings me, finally, to the kind of humility I witnessed in Remi. Jesus has conflict with his disciples not only in their lack of humility in relation to each other. No. He also criticizes them for internalizing society's dismissal of those whose value is deemed as purely instrumental. Children were important in Jesus' world, but important not in themselves as persons, but in what they had to offer their families and society as a whole. Children were the future, children were insurance and care for old age, and children were there to serve their parent's honour and glory. Our children reflect us. We pour everything we have into them not only because we value them for themselves. Our children's success will also reflect on us and our view of ourselves: exalted or diminished, honoured or humiliated, greater than others or lesser, success or failure. We want our children and grandchildren to live out our dreams and not make any of our mistakes. We want them to have aspiration, courage and success and not carry any of our fears, anxieties, and life failures we'd rather forget.

And yet, according to Jesus, there is a quality in children in and of themselves that is the secret for living rich inner lives as adults. In fact, declares Jesus, unless adults become more like children, the kin-dom of God will never be entered into. So what is it about children that is the secret for a full life? It is what I saw in Remi: Curiosity, wonder, an openness to trust, a desire to learn, a humility that is a thirst and hunger to grow and take in.

Not only do we lose the capacity for wonder, awe, an openness to trust and a thirst to learn and grow. Not only do we lose this as adults, but our social media crushes this in our children too. Everyone is too busy trying to promote themselves and how great, beautiful, popular and successful they are rather than becoming child-like in wonder, openness and a thirst to learn and grow. Who wants to project such vulnerability and humility in a world where you have to know it all and be all. So sad yet so true.

And so, Jesus teaches humility and Jesus embodies humility. To the arrogant self-exaltation of believing ourselves to be the gift the universe needs, Jesus teaches and embodies the greatness of being a servant and the fullness of experiencing all of life as a gift for which humble gratitude is the fitting response. To the deluded imagination that we know all we need to know and are all we need to be, Jesus teaches and embodies the being of children who are capable of wonder, curiosity, awe, openness, a hunger and thirst to learn from others and grow in love without discriminating the life all around them. To grow in such humility is the recipe to living lives of true abundance as God has designed us to live them.

What about you and me? Where does the humility of experiencing life as a gift and all good things people do as gifts fit into our way of being in life? Where does the way of servanthood draw us rather than a neediness to receive constant praise, recognition and affirmation for how great and worthy we are? How does the child-like humility of wonder, awe, curiosity, an openness to learn, and a thirst to understand and know what is beautiful, true and good live in us? Do we need to be reminded? Do we need to be born again into childlikeness?

May God find us where we are, embrace us where we are, and take us where we have yet to go... Amen.

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