

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 mom and was totally devoted to Remi. But she also struggled financially.

But coming to their rescue was Sidney. 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, reputation 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 to them, 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 then 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 better live into in order to truly experience the fullness of gratitude for everything good in your life because it 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 full. 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, openness to trust and a thirst to learn and grow 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 in

comparison to others, 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 points to 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 putting down those 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.