

It's Hard to Be Humble

In the name of Jesus, dear friends in Christ: The Spanish explorer Ponce de Leon supposedly searched what was to become the state of Florida for the Fountain of Youth – a spring of miraculous water that would rejuvenate body and soul. He didn't find it. Some years later another Spanish explorer named Coronado searched the American southwest for the fabled Seven Cities of Gold. He was disappointed to find instead the adobe structures of the Pueblo Indians. Physicists since the turn of the 20th century have been trying to formulate a Unified Field Theory: a single equation that incorporates all four of the forces of nature that hold the universe together, namely gravity, electromagnetism, and the strong and weak atomic forces. To date they've been unsuccessful. Marriage rates among young adults in our country have dropped precipitously in the last few decades. It's not that they don't *want* to get married; it's that each one wants to find the perfect spouse before they commit themselves. The *perfect* spouse, however, is an extremely rare commodity. As a matter of fact, my wife got the last one. At least that's how I understand it. Another way it might be explained is that she gave up looking and decided to settle for something decidedly less. I'll stick with my version of the story.

The point being that some things are awfully hard to find. In some cases it's because they don't exist. There is no Fountain of Youth. There is however a spring of living water from which one may drink and live forever. His name is Jesus Christ. Ol' Ponce was looking in the wrong place. The seven cities of gold are believed to be a case of false advertising. Someone reported having seen the settlements of the Pueblo Indians and, well, their description was vastly exaggerated over multiple retellings. It may be that in the future some brilliant mind will come up with a Unified Field Theory that actually works. But don't hold your breath until then. And the quest to find the perfect spouse? In a world in which all people are imperfect, you are never going to find one. If such a person did exist, they wouldn't make the mistake of marrying you. The goal instead should be to find someone (of the opposite sex) you can live with and for whom through love and understanding and forgiveness you can be a good and faithful spouse.

One of the hardest things to find that actually does exist (at least in theory) is the Christian virtue of humility. As the old song goes "It's hard to be humble". It really is. Pride, self-exaltation, boastfulness and self-centeredness are at the very root of our sinful condition. Humility runs counter to all these. And here's the thing: as Christians we know that we should pursue humility – it's a good thing. So you work at trying to be humble. But the moment you think you've achieved it, it proves that you haven't: "I have become truly humble!" Yeah, no. If you think you see humility in yourself, it's not there. It's a virtue that can't be seen by one who has it.

Worse still, because we are not humble by nature and yet are instructed by our Lord to be so, we tell ourselves, well, at least I can appear to be that way. I'll defer to my inferiors. I'll serve those who really should be serving me. I'll *act* like I'm humble. But that's just it: it's an act. It's false humility. True humility sees everyone else as better than me. True humility finds joy in serving those who need most to be served. What's to be done?

In today's Gospel we find Jesus giving lessons in humility to the Pharisees, who were some of the most prideful people who ever lived. Their high opinion of themselves knew no bounds and was only matched by their low opinion of everyone else. But because there lives a prideful Pharisee in all of us, we too ought to pay close attention to the lessons Jesus gives.

Our Lord is one of many guests who have been invited to a banquet at the home of a prominent Pharisee. The house itself is palatial and it's a lavish feast that's been prepared. To the host and other guests Jesus seems to be out of his league. They're not sure what to make of him. They regard him with a mixture of amusement, curiosity, confusion, and antagonism. They all feel vastly superior to him. They are the upper crust of society. They have higher pedigrees, better educations, more money, and finer clothes. They drive only the best sort of chariots. They hobnob only with the right and most religious sort of people. Jesus, on the other hand, is the poor son of common laborer. He hails from a pathetic little village no one ever speaks of except to make fun of. He has no formal education. He wears the rough clothes of a peasant. He is known to share his table with sinners, prostitutes, and tax collectors. And yet, he has managed to gather a large following among the "deplorable" masses that make up ninety percent of the population. He preaches and teaches in ways that hold them enthralled. It's widely reported that he can perform incredible healing miracles. And he has critically harsh things to say about the Pharisees and other religious leaders.

That's why Jesus has been invited. They want to check him out. They want to satisfy their curiosity. Mostly, they want to put him in his place and confirm their own high opinions of themselves. So they've arranged a test. It's widely rumored that Jesus has no respect for the Law of Moses; specifically that he routinely violates the Sabbath Commandment. Horror of horrors, he does work on the day of rest. Okay. Let's see if it's true.

They've invited another guest who is also out of place here. He's got a case of dropsy – what we call edema today. It involves swelling due to fluid retention in body tissues, usually in the feet, legs, hands, and arms – but it can affect any part of the body. It's often caused by problems with the heart or liver. By the Law of Moses a person suffering from dropsy was considered ceremonially unclean. No doubt he's wondering how in the world he got invited to come to this high end event – on a Sabbath day no less. Carefully avoiding getting too close to him, the other guests gently herd him to where Jesus can catch sight of him. They want to see what Jesus will do. If he heals the man, they'll be able to condemn Jesus and dismiss him as the sinner they believe him to be. They all lean forward, holding their breath, eagerly hoping that Jesus will take the bait.

Instead, Jesus asks them a question. They're the experts on the Law. They should have the answers. "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath, or not?" Silence. No one dare speak. It would spring their trap prematurely. Since the experts are silent, Jesus acts. He heals the man. The swelling and presumably the underlying condition that caused it vanish at once. Their awe at the miracle holds the guests speechless – at least for a moment.

Before they can get over their astonishment and begin to sputter their outrage, Jesus asks another question: If your son or even your ox fell into a well on the Sabbath, wouldn't you immediately pull it out? Again they don't give reply, but this time for another reason. They consider the absurdity of calling down to a child gasping for breath in the cold dark, "Sorry, son. You'll have to wait till tomorrow for rescue. It's the Sabbath you know. It'd be a sin to pull you out. Oh, and stop treading water. You're doing too much work. Just rest." The Pharisees realize their plan has backfired. Jesus has put them to shame. He's also established the principle that it's never the wrong time to do the right thing.

More on that later for at this time dinner is called. It's Jesus' turn to watch the Pharisees as they scramble for the places of honor. In the dining hall there are multiple tables around which they may gather, each one ranked by status. There's the host's table at one end at which may recline only the most distinguished and venerable among them. At the opposite end

there's the "kiddie" table reserved for novice Pharisees and seminary students. The tables in between are ranked accordingly. And at each table there are places considered to be of higher or lesser honor. So picture the scene: the Pharisees are all sizing each other up trying to figure out how much I rate compared to these others – some of whom I know and there're others I don't. And since each one tends to overestimate his personal score and devalue the others, there's a mad dash for the places of highest honor. It's like musical chairs for adults. "Oh! He beat me to it – even though he doesn't deserve it. Gotta find another place fast!

Jesus watches them with what I have to believe is mild amusement and likely some measure of disgust. He offers some helpful advice. You really want to be honored in the eyes of everyone? Do it this way: select a low place for yourself. If you shoot too high the host may bounce you out of your place in favor of a guest more distinguished than yourself. Then you'll be humiliated before everyone. But if you go low, the host may see you and say, "What are you doing there? You deserve a much better place." And he'll bounce someone else in your favor. Then you'll be honored and they'll be humiliated. It's a clever approach. What he neglects to say is that the plan might backfire. Maybe the host will see where you're sitting and think, "Yep, that's about right. Good thing he finally realizes where he belongs." That *would be* humiliating.

Two things to point out here: first, by giving this advice, Jesus is reflecting the wisdom of Solomon that we heard in today's first lesson, "Do not put yourself forward in the king's presence or stand in the place of the great, for it is better to be told, 'Come up here', than to be put lower in the presence of a noble." It's just good practical advice for social situations. It really doesn't speak to the attitude of the heart. That's the greater issue. A truly humble person is pleased to take a place of lesser honor. He wants the honor to go to others and doesn't care if he receives any. He sees himself as unworthy of it.

And now Jesus – who has assumed the role of teacher to these men who see themselves as the premier teachers of the Law – addresses his host: When you throw a banquet like this, don't invite people who can return the invitation. You're only giving to get. Rather invite those who can't return the invitation: the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. You will be repaid in the resurrection of the just. Again Jesus is speaking about a true attitude of humility – how a humble person finds joy in serving those who need it the most.

But it goes back to the first part of the story. The host invited all the fat cats, the high and the mighty, and two others: Jesus, so he could humiliate him; and a desperately sick man who could be used as a tool to do it. The host didn't care about that man or his problem. He had no love or pity in his heart. As a ruler of the Pharisees this man saw himself as the best of the best, as near to perfect in the sight of God as a person could possibly be. Jesus revealed what he was: a loveless sinner full of pride and arrogance as far from God and his righteousness as a person could be. The host meant to humiliate Jesus, God's Son. God's Son humiliated him.

It's doubtful that the Pharisees took to heart Jesus' lessons on humility. It only gave them cause to hate him more. The question is: will the Pharisee in us take his lessons to heart? I said before that it's hard to be humble. Because we are sinners full of self importance and self righteousness, it's impossible. We can't be humble. We can only be humiliated. We can only be revealed for what we are: wretched sinners in rebellion against Almighty God, lost, helpless, without hope in ourselves; shown this so that we come to repentance and flee to Christ for mercy and forgiveness.

In him we find not only our salvation, but also the perfect model of humility. Though he was the eternal Son of God in glory, he cast it aside to take on our human flesh and be born of a virgin betrothed in marriage to poor common laborer in a village people made jokes about. He grew up as a peasant, learning a trade from his assumed father, working hard with his hands, and helping his mother care for six younger siblings. Later he began his ministry, teaching all who would hear from the highest to the lowest without distinction, and serving those who needed most to be served: the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And then in his greatest act of humility he served us all. He who was the highest in heaven took the lowest place in hell when he suffered and died for us on the cross, bearing our sins and enduring for us his Father's righteous wrath. His humiliation complete, the King of all the universe said, "Come up here and sit and my right hand." He who humbles himself shall be exalted. And so he has.

May it be that we open our hearts to these lessons of Jesus, allowing him to show us the prideful, wretched sinners that we are, that he humble us, reveal our need for his forgiveness and righteousness, fill us with his Spirit to make us more like him in his humility, and in the end, raise us to glory with him. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!