

Sundays after Pentecost - Year C [Proper 17]

September 1, 2019

Haven Lutheran Church

Readings: Psalm 112; Luke 14: 1, 7-14

### "Christ-like Humbleness - A Freedom to Live Boldly"

When we hear today's gospel, we might want to tell Jesus he was not being a very good dinner guest. We might be so unnerved by his critical commentary of the guests and the host, we could miss what it is he is trying to teach. In this instance and in the example of his own life, Jesus calls us to live in humbleness and humility.

I would guess many of us think humbleness and humility means we're not suppose to brag or think too highly of ourselves.... we're to be self-depreciating and not proud .... always feeling a bit unworthy of any praise, success, maybe even love. I do not think that even gets *close* to what Jesus had in mind. Humility is **not** to be faked or used to manipulate a better seat at the banquet. Humbleness is **not** *humiliation*, being a doormat or forever feeling degraded, ashamed or inadequate. I offer this definition instead - Christian humility is a **quality of life** open to persons who knows their worth is not measured by recognition from their peers but by the unshakable certainty that God has accepted them.<sup>1</sup> Christian humbleness is a *freedom to live boldly in the fullness of God's gifts so others may also know the goodness, glory and love of our Lord.*

In first century Palestine, one's worth was wrapped up in your perceived status, how others ranked you on a scale from high prestige to scum of the earth, based on your wealth, family heritage, occupation, political influence or social calendar. On this Labor Day weekend in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we are still being tempted to measure our worth by the standards of our peers, gauging where we are on some scale, based on our salary, neighborhood, clothes, body, car, grades, social contacts, influences.... or seat at a banquet. That's not living as God intended. Attaching our self-worth to such worldly measures is a no-win, dead-end bondage. Can you really ever be sure..... ever have enough? Jesus challenges us as he did those Pharisees: "What kind of satisfaction or peace do you expect to find when you need to use life to prove you are worthwhile and better than your neighbor?" Jesus then offers a better way. Try living in the certainty that God's Kingdom will be victorious and our place of honor has already been won. Try living to please the Lord who loves us infinitely, perfectly, unconditionally. What might it look like to live in Christian humbleness, **freed to live boldly in the fullness of God's gifts so other may also know the goodness, glory and love of our Lord?**

One afternoon in 1953, reporters and local dignitaries gathered at the Chicago railroad station, awaiting the arrival of the 1952 Nobel Peace prize winner. He stepped off the train - a dignified six-foot-four, with bushy hair and large mustache. As cameras

flashed, city officials greeted him, telling him how honored they were to meet him. He thanked them politely and then, suddenly something caught his eye over their heads. He asked them to please excuse him for a moment. He walked through the stunned crowd with quick strides until he reached the side of an elderly black woman who was obviously struggling with two large suitcases. After a few words, he took the bags in his big hands and smiling, escorted the woman to a bus. As he helped her aboard, he wished her a safe journey. The crowd had trailed along behind him. He turned to them, saying with all sincerity, "Sorry to have kept you waiting." The man was Dr. Albert Schweitzer, the famous missionary-doctor and Nobel Peace Prize winner who had spent much of his life helping the poorest of the poor in Africa. **He lived boldly in the fullness of God's gifts, not for his own glory but for God's.** One member of the reception committee said to one of the reporters, "That is the first time I ever saw a sermon walking."<sup>2</sup>

Robert Coles is a psychiatrist and author across several academic disciplines. He tells this story about Dorothy Day, a well-known Catholic social worker who lived among the urban poor and championed their cause. Coles was in medical school at the time, studying to be a psychiatrist, proud of his status, and also proud that he had volunteered to work with the famous Dorothy Day in helping the poor. He arrived for his first meeting to discover Day sitting at a table, deep in conversation with a very disheveled street person. She didn't notice Cole had come into the room until they had finished the conversation. Then she asked, "Do you want to speak to one of us?" Astounded that the renowned Day made no distinction between herself and the street person with whom she had been talking, Cole said he learned more in that moment than in his four years at Harvard. **She lived boldly in the fullness of God's gifts, living a life that pointed toward God's goodness, glory and love.**<sup>3</sup>

One last snapshot. Father Henri Nouwen had been a priest for 25 years. For 20 years he had been an author, teacher at Notre Dame, Yale and Harvard, and popular speaker throughout the globe. In 1985 Nouwen accepted a call to be the pastor of the Daybreak community located in the suburbs of Toronto, Canada. Daybreak is one community in the worldwide L'Arche network where severely mentally and multiple handicapped adults reside with staff as a Christian community.

Nouwen recalls when Trevor, one of the handicapped members of the Daybreak community, had to spend a few months in a hospital for psychological evaluation. Nouwen decided to go see him and called the hospital chaplain to be sure it was okay. The chaplain said he was welcome to come and wondered if it would be alright if he invited some of the area ministers and priest and some of the hospital staff to have lunch with him when he visited. Without thinking much about it, the priest said, "Sure, that will be fine."

When Nouwen arrived at 11 a.m., a large group of clergy and hospital personnel warmly welcomed him. He looked around for Trevor. Not seeing him, Nouwen asked the chaplain, "I came here to visit Trevor. Can you tell me where I can find him?" The hospital chaplain said, "You can be with him after lunch." Nouwen was stunned, "But didn't you invite *him* for lunch?" "No, no, that's impossible. Staff and patients don't have lunch together. Moreover, we have reserved the Golden Room for this occasion, and no patient has ever been allowed in that room. It's for staff only." "Well," Nouwen said, "I will only have lunch with you all when Trevor can be there too. Trevor and I are close friends. It is for him that I came, and I am sure he would love to join us for lunch." After some perplexed looks and whispering, he was told he could bring Trevor with him to the Golden Room.

He found Trevor on the hospital grounds looking for wildflowers. When he saw Nouwen his face lit up and he ran up as if they had never been apart. "Henri, here are some flowers for you." Together they went to the Golden Room where about 25 people were seated around a table beautifully set. People were making small talk, mostly strangers trying to get to know each other. The atmosphere seemed somewhat sedate and stiff. Nouwen became involved in a conversation with his right-hand neighbor. Trevor suddenly stood up, took his glass of Coke, lifted it and said with a loud voice and a big smile, "Ladies and gentlemen... a toast!" Conversation abruptly stopped. Faces looked puzzled and anxious. Nouwen said he could almost hear their thoughts, "What in the heck is this patient going to do? Better be careful?"

But Trevor had no worries. He looked at everyone and said, "Lift up your glasses." Everyone obeyed. Then, as if it were the most obvious thing to do, he started to sing: "When you're happy and you know it, lift your glass...." As he sang, people's faces relaxed and started to smile. A few joined Trevor in his song and soon everyone was standing, singing loudly under Trevor's direction.

Nouwen reports: "Trevor's toast radically changed the mood in the Golden Room. He had brought these strangers together and made them feel at home. His beautiful smile and fearless joy had broken down barriers between staff and patient... [**Living fully in God's gifts**] Trevor did what nobody else could have done. He transformed a group of strangers into a community of love by his simple, unconscious blessing. He, a meek man, became the living Christ among us." <sup>4</sup>

The humble living Christ calls us to in this gospel is not about hiding our light under bushels, refusing compliments or blending into the woodwork. It's about **being a simply bold walking sermon**.... living lives that point toward God.... *breaking down barriers with the blessing God has made each of us to be*. Christian humility is about being free from the draining need to prove ourselves worthwhile, needed and lovable. Christian humility is

living in the fullness of our Baptism, where the Lord declared us to children of the Kingdom forever, with places of honor already set for us.” And our Lord is still saying to us, “My beloved daughters, my beloved sons, I call you to take the treasure you are into the world so others might know Me and come to the banquet.” It’s God’s Kingdom. It’s God’s party. Through the ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus, the eternal banquet is already underway.

If you love God and you know it, eat the bread.

If you love God and you know it, drink the wine.

If you love God and you know it, and you really want to show it,

toast the Lord of us all with your lives. Amen

Pastor Linda M Alessandri

## ENDNOTES

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1. Adapted from R. Alan Culpepper in his study of “Luke,” New Interpreter’s Bible, Vol. IX, p. 287
  2. Author unknown
  3. Recounted by Janice W Hearn in her article, “Sermon Reviews” Lectionary Homiletics, September 2001 p. 4.
  4. Henri Nouwen, Can You Drink the Cup? Pp 64-66, 69.