

**Humility without pretense**

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Emmanuel Episcopal Church, West Roxbury, Massachusetts, on the Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost, October 23, 2016

*...for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted. Luke 18:14*

Joel was in the prophetic tradition of speaking for God both to warn as well as to encourage people in times of stress and turmoil. Other prophets preached gloom leaving them feeling vulnerable to humiliation and guilty that they had brought hard times on themselves.

At this point in their history their harvest is plentiful and everyone has enough to eat. Joel proclaims a glorious future in which sons and daughters will prophesy the vision of what God intends for them. It is precisely in prosperous times that the prophet has to warn people to be grateful for what God has given them, urging them not to take anything or anyone for granted. It is humbling to learn to appreciate all that God has given us.

Humility is an acquired characteristic. We are born as self-centered creatures concerned only with our own needs and wants. We are humbled to learn that we aren't the center of the universe. Humility is something we all have to learn. Some learn sooner and more successfully than others.

In Jesus' parable or teaching story about two men who go up to the temple to pray is about humility. One is a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee has made a valiant effort to be a good and generous person. He has followed the requirements of the law, including fasting twice a week and giving a tenth of his income for charitable purposes. He thanks God that he hasn't given in to living the disreputable life of a thief, a rogue, an adulterer or the hated tax collector praying with him.

Pharisees were known and respected as the standard of goodness and righteousness because of their strict adherence to rules and customs and the letter of the law. They were respected for maintaining the standard of goodness and righteousness.

Tax collectors were known sinners because they participated in a corrupt tax system by extorting money from the people and keeping a portion of it for themselves. This tax collector is repentant. He is genuinely sorry for being dishonest in his dealings and does not feel good about himself. He prays to God for mercy and forgiveness.

The difference in these two men is that the Pharisee has no sense of his sin while the tax collector knows his sin and prays for mercy. The Pharisee is unaware of his sin and is in a worse relationship with God while the tax collector praying for forgiveness is in a better relationship with God. One man is giving thanks to God for being better than others while the other man prays only for mercy. The notorious and disreputable but repentant tax collector is in a better relationship with God than the Pharisee who hasn't a clue about his own sin.

Let's be very clear about one thing. It is an oversimplification to say that the Pharisee is morally corrupt and the tax collector is honorable. The Pharisee's prayer is sincere. To characterize him as a hypocrite is to miss the point. He lives by the only standard of goodness that he knows and therefore is genuinely a good person. He is committed to living a good and decent life. What he does not understand is that we are all sinners and that we can't make judgments about other people. Only God can do that.

We don't like to have our faults and shortcomings pointed out to us but we also can't get away with accepting the way we are. It is wrong to think that we can't change. We are all capable of learning to change our behavior at any age. It is all a matter of being willing to make the effort to make the needed changes.

I learned early on not to indulge in the habit of comparing myself with others, either favorably or unfavorably. To do so was to be insecure and unsure of myself. A healthy amount of self-esteem enables us to recognize our own weaknesses and not make assumptions about the lives of other people. Humility is neither false modesty nor putting ourselves down.

Truly genuine and whole people have sufficient self-awareness to know their strengths and weaknesses. God takes all that and redeems it. Just knowing that puts things into perspective. That is why being part of the kingdom of God means not presuming anything about our selves or other people. In God's realm no one says, "What are you doing here?" No one says, "Who let you in?"

Saint Paul sees this life as running a race against evil in which God is the final judge. It is not up to us to judge who is in first place or who is eligible to claim the prize. The race continues for as long as we live because God is never finished with us.

Genuine humility means not having to focus attention on our selves. The more we are willing to focus on others the better. If people have to tell you that they are humble and self-effacing, they most likely are not. If they have say how important they are or how well they are liked they reveal not only their insecurity but also their lack of humility. Truly humble people do not talk down to you nor are they aloof or have to prove themselves better. If we are secure enough in our own self we can admit when we're wrong. Building others up rather than putting them down goes a long way. How much trouble we avoid if we are less concerned with what our neighbor thinks and more concerned with examining our own life.

The opposite of humility is pride. Marcus Aurelius, the second century Emperor of Rome wrote in his Meditations that the want of pride is the most intolerable of all. God knows us better than we know ourselves and God is the only one who can be the judge.