

30th Sunday of Ordinary Time “Aesop and a Lesson in Humility”
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And now a word from Aesop, just in time for Halloween...the fable is entitled “The Frog and the Ox” (Taken from Aesopfables.com).

"Oh Father," said a little Frog to the big one sitting by the side of a pool, "I have seen such a terrible monster! It was as big as a mountain, with horns on its head, and a long tail, and it had hoofs divided in two." "Tush, child, tush," said the old Frog, "that was only Farmer White's Ox. It isn't so big either; he may be a little bit taller than I, but I could easily make myself quite as broad; just you see." So he blew himself out, and blew himself out, and blew himself out. "Was he as big as that?" asked he. "Oh, much bigger than that," said the young Frog. Again the old one blew himself out, and asked the young one if the Ox was as big as that. "Bigger, father, bigger," was the reply. So the Frog took a deep breath, and blew and blew and blew, and swelled and swelled and swelled. And then he said: "I'm sure the Ox is not as big as..." But at just that moment he burst. The End.

Ouch, what a scary story! Again, just in time for Halloween. Aesop's Fables are kind of creepy, aren't they? And what could the moral of the story be? I think it is this: puffing ourselves up can lead to our self-destruction. Which is to say, egotism and pride can lead to our undoing. If we puff ourselves up too much in life, eventually our world will explode. In other words, this fable from Aesop is a lesson about humility.

Jesus says as much in the Gospel reading, “whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and the one who humbles himself will be exalted.” Let's take a closer look at the Gospel parable and what Jesus means by humility. To begin with, both the Pharisee and the tax collector were well off financially, so there wasn't a juxtaposition of material wealth in the story. I find that interesting. The Pharisee, who was considered to be an honorable person in that society, is in the temple area self-righteously listing off all his good works in his prayers. He is thinking to himself he had deserved God's favor because of his good deeds. Instead of praying to God, it seems as if he was praying to himself. He had more or less puffed up his ego to the level of divinity which of course leads to disaster.

The tax collector meanwhile had a profession that made him the most despised person in town. He was well off because he was a collaborator with the Roman occupiers, a traitor in the eyes of most, even seen as a thief. His prayers however were different than the Pharisee. The tax collector threw his life into the hands of God's mercy. He understood that nothing he could ever do in this life could ever merit anything from God. He came to awareness that he didn't even have a right to life itself, let alone any possessions in life. He therefore threw himself into the arms of God's grace. Jesus says the tax collector's prayers were heard and answered.

Again, the economic statuses of both characters in the parable are not germane. The Gospel therefore can provide us a very interesting take on our first reading from Sirach, “the prayer of the lowly pierces the clouds... nor will it withdraw till the Most High responds”. Although Jesus had a preferential option for the poor, it seems as if Jesus redefined lowly for us in a new way. Perhaps Jesus even redefined the word poor for us too, in a way that has nothing to do with the size of our paychecks or socioeconomic status.

And to accentuate that point, there is St. Paul in our second reading, imprisoned, awaiting execution, abandoned, and his life being poured out like a libation. Everything had been taken away from him, his family, friends, wealth, adequate food, and so on and so forth. You can imagine the sanitary conditions of his cell. Although he shares his relief that he wasn’t going to be eaten by lions, all he had to look forward to was the date for his beheading. St. Paul however had a spiritually peaceful enough heart to be able to write, “The time of my departure is at hand. I have competed well; I have finished the race; I have kept the faith. And from now on the crown of righteousness awaits me”. St. Paul is writing from a place of supreme poverty. However, because of his faith he is the wealthiest man in the world. He is writing from a place of complete abandonment and trust to the grace of almighty God. His letters and his martyrdom continue to serve as a witness to us to this day.

So what is humility? What is the virtue of humility Jesus is calling us to? I like looking at the Latin root of words and so in the word humility you can find the word humus. Humus literally means earth, soil, or ground. And so, it is clear that a humble person isn’t someone who puffs themselves up like the Pharisee in the Gospel reading or the bullfrog in our Aesop’s fable. On the other hand, I think it is also correct to say that a humble person isn’t someone who puts their light under a bushel basket either. We call this false humility and a waste of talent. Jesus encourages us to put our lights on lampstands, to use our gifts to benefit others, as we see in many places in the Gospels. And so, humility, properly understood, is reflective of someone who has their feet planted on the ground. This is why when St. Paul talks about competing well, finishing the race and keeping the faith, he is not bragging. He is sharing this with us from a place of profound humility.

And we don’t have to look farther than Jesus for an example of what humility looks like. Jesus didn’t need to be born in a temple, a manger will do. Jesus was just as divine on Good Friday as he was on Easter Sunday. The size of his money bag or the latest opinion polls didn’t alter the truth of who he was and what he was about. Jesus was grounded in his mission. His mission wasn’t about himself but about care and concern of everybody else. Because of this, in his relationship with us, Jesus prefers we be honest with him in our prayers, and as we pray we should remember to be loving and merciful to the people in our lives. This also means the difficult people in our lives because Jesus wants to save them too.

We can ask ourselves this week, who am I in the Gospel story? Am I more like the Pharisee who puffs himself up too much in the presence of God and others? If so, I should remember the story of the bullfrog. This didn’t work out so well for the bullfrog. On the other hand, we can ask ourselves, am I more like the tax collector whose prayers are heard? That clearly has a far better outcome provided our humility is accompanied by a conversion of heart.

And so, as we reflect on the Gospel reading, I think a couple life lessons reveal themselves like, do you want a sure fire way to get everyone to hate you? Puff yourself up wherever you go like that Pharisee in our Gospel reading. That will do the trick. No one will want to be around you. I guarantee it. On the other hand, do you want a sure fire way to get people to love you? Care about others more than yourself and be honest about your mistakes. Everyone likes to be around people like that. The Pharisee in Jesus' parable didn't get this important life lesson, so his prayers were not answered. The hated tax collector finally had a conversion experience and now understood this life lesson, and so his many sins are forgiven. My friends, the Gospel this weekend gives us a clear recipe on how to have a better relationship with our Father in heaven and better friendships with the people around us, and that lesson is this: "whoever exalts himself will be humbled and whoever humbles himself will be exalted".