

Pentecost 15C: Announce Retirement 10/31/16: Holy Humility

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Rev Ken Wratten at St Stephen's, San Jose

Jeremiah 2:4-13 Israel's great pride has led them to forsaking God.

Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16 Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers.

Luke 14:1, 7-14 Jesus instructs guests to sit at the lower place. (Humility)

Today's gospel reading presents a teaching for us students of Christ about a very down to earth issue. It is the issue of deliberately choosing the values that will guide our behavior and attitude toward each other.

Jesus recognized a 'values problem' among the dinner guests of the Pharisee when he saw them playing musical chairs, trying to get the places of honor as they sat for the meal. At first glance it seems like Jesus wanted to explain good table manners. At Palestinian formal meals in that time, guests laid on couches in groups of three, around a central table where the food was placed. The middle grouping was considered the place of highest honor and was awarded by the host based on the guest's office or wealth or power. If a more eminent guest came late, as it was fashionable for them to do, the one who had already chosen the high place could be asked to step down. A parallel today might be someone coming to your home for a meal, and rushing to sit at the head of the table. In my home, that spot at the dinner table was reserved for our dad. From that place he cut the meat, and filled each person's plate, deciding how much of the food I did not like he was going to make me eat. His seating location conveyed honor, and lots of power. From there he got to ration out corned beef gravy and mashed potatoes, succotash, and liver and onions.

Back to Jesus at the table! His teaching to the dinner guests reflected good social etiquette, so that no one would be embarrassed by being asked to move to a "lower" place. But there is a deeper message in this lesson. This is a lesson about thinking like a servant, and it applies to all of us.

Jesus' counsel was to always think about the honor that God expects them to give others, regardless of social station. Jesus told them, "all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted". This is a call to those who really claim to be disciples, claim to be students of Christ, committed to the work of conforming themselves to be like Christ, about how to live their lives from the true center of their being.

God said (Isaiah 43:7), "They are my own people, and I created them to bring me glory." God wants us to bring him glory. 2 Cor 3:18, "As the Spirit of the Lord works within us, we become more and more like him and reflect his glory even more." You and I are created by God to be in

relationship with Him and with each other in a way that brings honor to God, and reflects honor back to ourselves. A fulfilling life brings glory and honor to God.

Jesus instructed the dinner host to not invite his friends, relatives, or rich neighbors; but to invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. Jesus envisions relationships where all the cultural lines of demarcation are erased. He sees relationships where we center ourselves in who we are, and what our God-given purpose is; and not in what position we hold, or what wealth or power we have.

When I showed up for work as your new vicar, I decided to do my best to model the kind of humility that Jesus taught. Instead of parking at the first parking space, I parked at the end of the lot. I quickly realized that was a long walk, so I moved next to the dumpster. I gave myself a smile face grade in humility.

A few years later, my office was broken into, and all of our keys were stolen, including all of the master keys. I immediately had the church re-keyed; and I had 20 master keys made. Some people wanted the same number key they had before, so I intentionally chose the last key, key #20. I remember feeling proud of how well I was practicing holy humility.

Years later, I presided a wedding. After the wedding Ruth and I attended the reception, and started looking for the card that marked my table. It was not near the head table; I kept looking; and I found our names at the back of the room. I felt the twinge of my human nature rearing up, making me feel less important because of the place I was given. It was a lesson in true humility.

On Tuesday of this past week, I called for a special meeting of the vestry, to announce my decision to retire this Fall from full time ministry, and as rector of St Stephen's. You have all gotten that notice by now, in a letter I sent out on Wednesday, and in the Friday Journal. The truth is that for all of us, our earthly status diminishes at some point. Retirement comes. Someone new takes our place, and we are expected to stay out of the way to clear the way for our successor. I am already seeing what that feels like. It is a lesson in true humility.

Jesus taught that retirement is NOT how the Kingdom of God works. There is NO RETIREMENT from our work for the Kingdom of God. You and I have a lifelong job assignment to emulate God's hospitality and generosity to everyone; and we are called by Christ to offer them in a spirit of humility. And if my life is any example, there will be lessons in true humility offered up to you by our loving God.

Another important insight from today's readings is that humility and love are connected. They both reinforce the relationships that are so important to God for us to live by. Jesus said, "Your strong love for each other will prove to the world that you are my disciples."

Relationship building and maintenance take effort, and it takes time to keep them healthy. We are so very busy in this culture we live in, making a living, keeping our work caught up, paying our bills, accomplishing the professional goals we've set for ourselves, as though these activities were the point to life. But they are NOT. The point to life is learning to love God and to love other people. Mother Theresa said, "It's not what you do, but how much love you put into it that matters".

1 John 3:18, "My children, our love should not be just in words and talk; it must be true love, which shows itself in action." Humility and love.

I have served you, and continue serving you as my time as your rector winds down, out of love for you; and I have tried to show that love through my actions among you. I have experienced that love reflected back to me in countless ways. I praise God for the opportunity I have enjoyed for over fourteen years in serving you and learning from you, and for the ways we have worked together to give God the glory, with a spirit of love and humility.

Amen.