

[Spirituality](#)

[Scripture for Life](#)

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St. Paul, in today's reading from Galatians, summarizes for us: "May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ." With the urgency and detachment of the 72, we go forth daily, bearing the good news of Christ. Then, as St. Paul says, we will be "a new creation."

One Internet ad for the Apple Watch promises you'll "never miss what matters" and explains that it's "you at a glance." It promises that this super gadget will become an essential part of who you are. The author of Hebrews would have understood the philosophical field where this ad grew up. This final section of Hebrews is very much about helping people to discern what matters and understand who they are. The essential difference is that while Apple promises to put it all on your wrist, the author of Hebrews says we'll understand it through celebrating with a community.

This selection from Hebrews invites us to glimpse the future coming toward us from God. The God who made Moses' mountains rumble has prepared a festival in the holy city where everyone and everything is coming to perfection: the fullness, the joy of union with God and one another for which we were created — something we have already but just barely tasted in moments of grace. In effect, the Hebrews author is saying, "Look there, the assembly of the firstborn — that's you at a glance!" This is the sort of vision that freed Jesus to be just exactly who he was, whether on the road, praying alone or at a party.

This week Luke takes us to another party with Jesus. At times Jesus must have felt like some of today's banquet-goers: unsure of what will be less pleasant, the

lukewarm food or the people who attend just to be seen. In reality, we don't have a single story of a meal Jesus shared that didn't involve some sort of contention. (Why does he let *her* touch him? Why does he eat and drink with sinners? Why don't they wash their hands? Martha, Martha, the company is more important than the menu! And finally, "The hand of the one who will betray me is with me on the table.") But then, Jesus brought enough wit to each situation that even if breaking bread with him was rarely peaceful, it was never boring. Perhaps that describes not just his meals but the process of conversion that they call forth.

Ostensibly, this week's readings focus on humility, seemingly promoting it as a pragmatic approach even if it's not a deeply felt conviction. The Gospel scene in which the guests try to appear distinguished while at the same time vying for prime placement is one that begs for a Mark Twain depiction. Was Jesus acting like a jester when he offered his suggestions for how the guests could ultimately get the recognition they craved by pretending it didn't matter? The problem there was that seating arrangements didn't matter to Jesus, while others believed their dignity depended on their social location. He and they operated on different planes.

The reading from Hebrews also deals with different planes, but in this case they are temporal rather than social. Hebrews challenges us to place ourselves in biblical time and remember how our ancestors came to know and fear God. Then, just as we begin to grasp the utter awe of witnessing God's self-manifestation in frightening fire and deafening trumpet, the author says, "That's where you came from, but today you are somewhere else." With that, we are given a glimpse of the future God has planned. It is symbolized as a holy city, with everyone totally taken up in inaugural festivities. There's a banquet on every block; ecstasy scents the air they breathe. Here, time is measured in quality rather than quantity. The joy of this vision flows counterclockwise as our irresistibly appealing God draws everyone and everything toward the perfection for which we were created.

This vision of God's future freed Jesus. Knowing where he was going allowed him to be just exactly who he was at every table. As he watched folks jockey for position and saw the embarrassed host try to herd them into the right places, there had to be a playful glint in his eye as he whispered to some, "Go down lower, then he'll have to come find you!" The twinkle surely grew when he said to the harried host, "Next time invite the blind and the hungry. They won't notice where they sit as long as there's food."

Even if he said it lightheartedly, Jesus was serious about the guest list revision, and not just because the outcasts would be more interesting than the inner circle. Every meal he shared was an experience of communion. Exclusivity in such a setting is a sacrilege. Seeking communion with people who are different from ourselves is a path toward conversion. It will be uncomfortable as our values get rearranged, but it will also be a practice round for enjoying the peace of communion at the festival God has prepared for us — for all of us, without distinction.

### **SIRACH 3:17-18, 20, 28-29**

The Book of Sirach is something like Ben Franklin's *Poor Richard's Almanack*, except that it was written about 130 years before the time of Christ. Not included in the canon of scripture by either Protestants or Jews, this collection of wisdom sayings is found only in Catholic Bibles. Although not all of its ideas may pass the test of time, it offers unique insight into the wisdom that would have been passed down through and beyond the time of Jesus.

When it came to humility, Mr. Franklin's approach was rather ironic; he admitted in his autobiography, "I cannot boast of much success in acquiring *the reality* of this virtue [humility], but I had a good deal with regard to *the appearance* of it." Such unpretentiousness about his inability to cultivate humility may come close to fulfilling Ben Sirach's advice. Rather than encouraging humility based on the virtue of "fear of God," a recognition of human littleness before the Creator, Sirach seems to suggest that humility works as a pragmatic approach to becoming loved by both people and God. One could interpret his advice as a good political stratagem: "Here's how to make it look good." But then, reading his counsel about humility in light of his statement that sages appreciate proverbs, we get a sense of the subtlety of his advice. Perhaps he is really saying that we should become wise enough to act ourselves into a new way of being; in other words, conduct yourself with humility and you will eventually understand how right you were to do so.

This is reminiscent of St. Ignatius of Loyola's suggestion that if someone on retreat cannot sincerely pray for a particular virtue, the next best thing is to pray for the grace to desire it enough to pray for it. That goes quite well with Sirach's teaching that "what is too sublime for you seek not." A part of humility is the understanding not only that we're not spiritual giants, but that we're probably not really ready and willing to be as holy as our aspirations would have us be. As Francis de Sales taught his friends, "Practice those little virtues suited to our littleness — little peddler, little

pack. ... There are virtues which are better practiced in going downhill than in climbing" (*Letters of Spiritual Direction*, Paulist Press, 1988).

In the end, this teaching proffers a delightful spiritual conundrum. It calls us to humility, which is a virtue only the humble can appreciate. Until we get there, it tells us to be wise enough to keep our ear to the ground and thus enjoy what we learn along the way. Beware: Listening will gradually reveal the reasons for which we should be humble.

### **HEBREWS 12:18-19, 22-24a**

This, the last of the C Cycle's four selections from Hebrews, invites us to become conscious of where we stand in the flow of biblical time. The author leads us to remember the Exodus, the key moment of God's history with Israel, and to focus particularly on the Mount Sinai theophany. That was God's self-manifestation made perceptible via the utterly terrifying symbols of fire, darkness, trumpets and storm. The author wants us to remember that when confronted with the Sinai revelation, our trembling ancestors groped apprehensively toward that mountain, begging that the spectacle cease before they became utterly overwhelmed. Once that memory has become sufficiently vivid, the author switches gears, saying, "That was then, this is now."

Now, we are told, you aren't looking at an insurmountable mountain but the city of the living God. In place of dread-inducing fiery phenomena, we are witnessing an inaugural festival. Whereas our ancestors were rightly overcome with the fear of God, we're invited into the company of the saints and angels, who are rejoicing because they have been brought to their perfection in God.

This selection invites us to put down whatever device we use to calculate chronology (watch, phone, tablet, etc.) to become conscious of how we have come to this moment formed by our collective past and are being lured forward into God's future — a future that has already begun. Understanding where we stand on that timeline will orient us to everything that matters.

### **LUKE 14: 1, 7-14**

Today we return to the party table with Jesus. As Luke begins this story, we get the strong impression that the folks at the gathering have an agenda that goes beyond a simple get-together with one another. First, Luke says that people were observing

Jesus carefully. That's thinly disguised code for the idea that they were scrutinizing his every move, and presumably not so that they could learn and follow his example.

In what our liturgical selection skips over, among the guests there was a man with dropsy, an unspecified sort of distension that must have been obvious if not downright repulsive to look at. Upon encountering him, Jesus turned directly to the surveillance team and asked whether one should help or ignore someone in need on the Sabbath. While they maintained wary silence, he expressed his unequivocal and powerful opinion by healing the man. All of that, we might say, happened at the entrance, before the party — and today's reading — actually began.

When we get inside, Luke tells us that Jesus was carefully observing the same people who had been watching him and saw them performing a sort of rooster rumble as they vied for the best positions. Sounding a bit like Sirach, Jesus offered them some free advice about how to save face. He warned them that their smug self-concepts might not match the host's ranking of the guest list. Rather than suffer the mortification of being exiled to a lower realm, they should put themselves in a position to be invited up higher. He ended his editorial with one of his oft-repeated aphorisms about the least and the greatest, in this case using it to point out that nobody enjoys being around self-important show-offs: If your table conversation is all about your greatness, you'll enjoy the rapt admiration only of the person sitting in your own seat.

Once he had helped the guests to their proper places, Jesus offered his host advice that might have actually sounded strangely attractive at that particular moment. Luke invites us to imagine Jesus, the entertaining sage who surely didn't show up in formal clothing, as he took in the social drama happening around him. Because his previous remarks were prompted by his observations of the guests' behavior, we can imagine that he had also seen the host dealing with the delicate double task of trying to diplomatically adjust both seating arrangements and egos. It's possible that there was a conspiratorial glint in Jesus' eye when he suggested that the next time the invitees should come from the poor. The marginal classes neither knew nor cared about seating etiquette and could never pay back either honor or insult.

In order to understand the scene, we need to remember that Jesus never sat at a meal that did not become a call to communion — communion among the guests and with the Creator God in whose name they blessed their table. Thus, when he looked at the people jockeying for position, he realized that they were blinded by mirror

vision: No matter what was before them, they saw only themselves and how circumstances reflected on them. His advice to look around, to find an unostentatious place, implied the invitation to see the others who were there. Seeing only themselves would have made for a boring banquet for them and for the others.

Jesus' suggestions for his host's next guest list have multiple layers of value. While there's no doubt that the crippled, blind and lame would make for a less contentious dinner crowd, other reasons outrank that one. The most obvious is that according to Jesus, those are the people about whom God is most concerned. Thus, caring for them is sharing God's load.

What is intriguing here is that Jesus suggests that the host invite the poor to his table. That's a far different thing from telling the servants to send them the leftovers or setting up a soup-kitchen for them. Either of those would have given food to the hungry, but Jesus was after more than that.

In Jesus' day, sharing a meal was a profound act of solidarity. To sit at table with someone implied that you would pray together, and that implied that you shared your relationship with God with one another. While not everyone probably thought it through in those terms, that was precisely why Jews could not eat with gentiles: They could not pray in communion, and they could not eat without praying. Therefore you could eat only with "your own." Entering into communion with God's poor would not put a host on the social register, but according to Jesus God would be in their debt. Their repayment would give them a place in the resurrection of the righteous.

## **Planning: 22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time (C)**

Soon after he was elected, Pope Francis told an audience of some 5,000 journalists, "How I would love a church that is poor and for the poor."

Many people wondered just what he meant. Certainly Pope Francis urges us to care for the poor and needy among us, and such care involves living more simply ourselves. He is very aware of the power that wealth and consumerism have in the modern world, and he invites us often to embrace a simpler life.

At the same time, I think his vision goes beyond material poverty and simplicity. It requires what today's readings emphasize — the virtue of humility. One of the big problems with being well-off is that we quickly begin to think of ourselves as self-sufficient, which then leads us to look down on those who appear needy and unable to take care of themselves. That pride can keep us from manifesting the mercy of God, because it keeps us from embracing the gift of mercy that God offers us. If we are self-sufficient, we think we are not in need of mercy. So Sirach urges us, "My child, conduct your affairs with humility, and you will be loved more than a giver of gifts. Humble yourself the more, the greater you are, and you will find favor with God."

Humility is not a matter of groveling. It is simply a matter of recognizing the truth about ourselves. Part of that truth, as Hebrews reminds us, is that we have been blessed by God to be able to approach "Mount Zion and the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem" — not in fear and trembling but with confidence. That confidence stems not from self-sufficiency but from knowing how much God loves us. The other part of our truth is that we are all limited, weak, and sinners. We need the mercy of God, and when we recognize that, we find it much easier to offer mercy to others.

So what does all this mean for those entrusted with the liturgy? For starters, it means that we need to remember that we are servants and stewards of the liturgy, not its masters. We can easily begin thinking that we make good liturgy happen by our own efforts. We can and should prepare well and do our best, but the power of the liturgy flows from the presence and grace of God in our midst.

Secondly, we are also servants of our brothers and sisters at worship. Humility enables us to treat each person with respect and care. We do not disdain those who seem less committed or less educated or less liturgically aware. There is no room for egotism among those who seek to be servants of the Lord and his people.

## **Prayers: 22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time (C)**

### **Introduction**

Today's readings focus on humility and instruct us to attend to those who are most needy. After all these centuries, they seem especially relevant now. How to conduct ourselves when we live in a culture that promotes success, power, self-

aggrandizement at every level? Awareness — both of self and others — is essential. Jesus calls us to forego our own wants, pay attention to those in need and expect no reward in return. That sounds easier than it is, which is why we're still talking about it.

## **Penitential Act**

- Lord Jesus, you counseled us to sit in the lowest place at table: Lord, have mercy.
- Christ Jesus, you taught us the importance of honoring those in need: Christ, have mercy.
- Lord Jesus, you call us to practice humility and concern for others: Lord, have mercy.

## **Prayer of the Faithful**

**Presider** Knowing that we are to be focused on the needs of others, we remember them now in prayer.

**Minister** For the church: that it may show us how to be humble servants ... we pray,

- For those who struggle with humility, who fear that it will be disempowering ... we pray,
- For those who live — for whatever reason — in debasing, dehumanizing circumstances ... we pray,
- For the ability to demonstrate humility as a viable national position ... we pray,
- For the wisdom to know when to be humble and when to resist bullying ... we pray,
- For students and teachers entering the academic year in substandard schools ... we pray,
- For individuals, groups and organizations serving those most in need ... we pray,
- For farmers across the world dealing with inclement weather and insufficient crops ... we pray,
- For the suffering, the sick and the dying in this community; and for those who have died ... (*names*) ... we pray,

**Presider** Gracious God who loves the poor, we pray for the awareness to be ever alert to those most in need. Grant us the humility to put their needs before our own

and to be willing to serve them with our whole hearts. We ask this in the name of Jesus, who loves us all. Amen.

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