

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

September 2, 2010 at 1:35pm

The paradox of humility: breaking into the reign of God

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The Peace Pulpit

Obviously, in our lessons today -- God's Word that we are listening to carefully -- we are being instructed about humility. This is a virtue that I think many of us have some trouble with -- even though in our first lesson the writer of that Book of Wisdom tells us that the greater you are, the more you should humble yourself and find favor with God. It is the humble that give God glory. We hear that, but we still wonder about being humble because many of us, I think, have an understanding of humility that it somehow means putting yourself down.

In fact, it's almost suggested in the Gospel: "Take the lowest place because you're not worthy of anything higher." That is not what humility is about -- putting yourself down or having disrespect for yourself, ~~asking a Sealdag and Ordinary Time~~ ^{Twenty-second Sunday in Ordinary Time} ~~poorly of ourselves, or to have a lack of respect for our worth and our goodness.~~ ^{Sirach 3:17-18, 20, 28-29} No, the word itself -- *humilis* in Latin -- means "on the ground or being of the earth," reminding us that we were made from dust and ~~unto dust we shall return.~~ ^{Psalm 66:4-5, 6-7, 10-11}

So it is simply having a right idea of where we came from and who we are and then in relationship to God. God has given us the gift of life, the gift of our body -- the gift that connects us with all other earthly beings and all of creation. So humility is really about being connected with those who also share our beginnings, but also then having the right understanding that it is God who has brought us forth. We need to have a high regard for who we are. ^{Hebrews 12:18-19, 22-24a} ^{Luke 14:1, 7-14}

Full text of the readings

I think that is brought out in our second lesson today when the writer of the letter to the Hebrews tells us: "Remember your initiation." And then goes on to remind the hearers of this letter that there was blazing fire, darkness, and gloom, and storms, blasts of trumpets, and such a voice that people pleaded that no

further word be spoken -- yet God entered into covenant with His people on Sinai. That's what's being referred to here -- the Mount of Sinai -- with Moses and the people traveling through the desert.

There was that fire, the storm, and the thunder and they entered into a cloud of darkness, but they were entering into this covenant with God. The writer goes on to say, "But those of us who have entered into the new covenant, you came near to Mount Zion, the city of the Living God, the heavenly Jerusalem. You have come to the solemn feast, the assembly of the first-born or God, whose names are written in heaven." So we enter into this new covenant: the spirit of peace, joy and love with all the dignity that goes with becoming sons and daughters of God.

There is a passage in the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah that I find very helpful in reflecting on what it means to belong to this new covenant. The people have rejected the first covenant and God is making a new covenant with them. He says, "Not like the one I made with your ancestors on the day I took them by hand and lead them out of Egypt. No, this is the covenant I make with my people now. I will put my law within them, write it on their hearts. I will be their God. They will be my people. They will not have to teach each other, neighbor, brothers or sisters. They know the Lord because they will all know me, from the greatest to the lowliest, for I will forgive their wrongdoing, no longer remember their sin."

So we have a tremendous dignity and worth. God lives within our hearts. That is what God is saying through Jeremiah. God could not be any closer to us -- give us greater dignity or worth. So even though we remember that we are from the earth -- and we are to remain grounded with the earth and connected with all other creation -- yet we are sons and daughters of God. God is present within our hearts. He is very close to us. So we have a tremendous dignity and worth.

I think the Gospel lesson today helps us to understand how we live out this virtue of humility through the two parables that Jesus tells. The first parable I think of as kind of following what you might call common sense, or human wisdom, as opposed to God's wisdom. I guess I might remind you here of how in the Letter of Saint Paul to the Church at Corinth Paul talks about the two different kinds of wisdom: human wisdom and divine or Godly wisdom.

It's a powerful contrast because Paul is telling the people: "Look, here am I, preaching of crucified Christ. That's what I have to preach. Jesus on the cross -- denigrated, humiliated, despised, spit upon, tortured, totally helpless. That's what I have to preach." Paul says to the Jews: "That's a scandal." They can't get over it. How could a God be subjected to that? To the Greeks, those who are supposed to be wise, he says, "It's foolishness, utter foolishness, but to those who believe, it's the very wisdom of God."

That wisdom of God is stronger than human weakness and wiser than human wisdom. God's wisdom is far beyond and above anything we can conceive of. God's weakness is stronger than human strength. God's wisdom is wiser than human wisdom. That's what Jesus is showing us here in these parables: how God's wisdom, if we follow it, is so much more important and better than human wisdom.

In the first parable you can easily picture the scene. You're invited to a feast of some sort: a wedding feast. You take the highest place and, sure enough, someone comes who is -- in the human sense -- more important. And you go down to the lowest. Human wisdom would say: "No," -- as Jesus says in the parable -- "take the lowest place and then no doubt you'll be moved up." That makes common sense. It's human wisdom, but the second parable shows us God suggesting that there is a wisdom that goes beyond human wisdom.

He tells the host: "Look, when you're having a feast, don't invite those who are rich and powerful or who are your friends or relatives because they will invite you back." That's a kind of human wisdom. Jesus said: "No, go beyond that. Here is the wisdom of God. Invite the poor. Invite the rejected, the lame, the

crippled. Invite the immigrant or invite those of another faith. Invite those who are outsiders, not connected with you. That's divine wisdom.?

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Now that doesn't seem to make much sense. Why would you do that? Jesus says "that's how you break into the reign of God." The reign of God is where everyone is treated equally. Everyone has a chance for a full, human life. Everyone lives in peace and joy, enjoying all the resources that God gave for all. We find ourselves in a sense of peace. That's the reign of God. If we lived according to the teaching of that parable, how different our world would be. We would be entering into communion and relationships with people of every kind.

We wouldn't have -- I don't think -- people gathering in Washington today to denounce President Obama as a Muslim and to denounce the idea that we should invite immigrants into our midst. Instead, we would have a society where we would welcome a mosque close to those areas where we have been damaged or suffered hurt. We would be trying to make reconciliation happen. For a lot of people this doesn't make sense and they'll denounce it, but again the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom -- and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength.

That is the paradox that Paul preaches. That's what Jesus is urging upon us in that second parable. If we really want to break into the reign of God -- make the reign of God begin to happen -- then we will learn to be humble, to recognize who we are and how we are related to God and to one another. But we will also learn how to live according to the wisdom of Jesus -- a wisdom that doesn't put people on different levels. We're all together. We're all brothers and sisters. We welcome one another into our midst. We are always reconciled with one another -- so that we break into the reign of God, so that we make peace happen in our world.

[This homily was preached at St. Hilary Parish, Redford, Mich.]

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