

Homily For 22nd Sunday in Ordinary time-Year C 2019

St Bernard of Clairvaux was once asked what the three most important virtues were. His response was: "Humility, humility and humility." Our first reading and Gospel make it abundantly clear that St. Bernard was correct! The author of the book of Sirach teaches that the greater we are, that is, the greater our natural gifts, our position of honor, authority, or wealth, the MORE we should be humble in the sight of God who has given them all to us. Humility is so important because it is no. 1-Knowing the truth about ourselves-i.e. seeing ourselves as we really are before God and no. 2-It's something we all struggle with!

So first of all, humility is spiritual sanity-i.e. seeing ourselves and reality as it truly is before God. It's important to note that humility IS NOT thinking of ourselves as bad, or no good, or that we really don't have any gifts, talents, or abilities to offer the world. No-that would be a false sense of humility-a "Woe is me attitude" that has nothing to do with the Christian virtue of humility. Rather, true humility allows me to see who I am in God's eyes. And that is a sinner who is redeemed and infinitely loved by an infinitely good God who desires that I spend eternity with him in heaven, and who I am dependent on for everything good in my life. Humility teaches me that I am in a position of complete dependency and vulnerability before God. And my brothers and sisters this can be really hard for us to accept! This brings us to point number 2.

Every one of us struggles with humility to some degree. Especially in a culture that constantly tells us therapeutic feel-good nonsense like “just be true yourself” or “just do what makes you happy” or “just do what feels good.” That kind of attitude sets US up as the measure of reality and goodness and happiness with no reference to God-and therefore sets us up for failure and disappointment! This brings us to our Gospel for today. We see Jesus giving what seems to be, at first glance, some good etiquette advice for social situations. Don’t take the place of honor at a wedding banquet because if there is someone of more distinguished rank than you who is present than it might lead to an embarrassing social situation for you, where you end up having to take the lowest place at the table. Rather, if you seek the lowest position-than there is a greater chance of you being recognized and esteemed in the sight of others when you are raised to higher position.

Certainly good advice! However, as always with Jesus, there is another, deeper layer to his words. Notice that Jesus says this after he notices how the guests at the dinner he was at “were choosing the places of honor at table.” There is something comforting in knowing that human beings struggled with humility even 2,000 years ago! This isn’t a new problem! However, the solution Jesus offers is new-because it is found only in him. If we want to be exalted and esteemed in the sight of God-than we must realize that we are nothing without him-that we are dependent on him for everything. Once we have realized that everything we have is a gift from God-and that we are in a position of complete dependency on him we are called to do the same with others. This is what Jesus is getting at when he speaks of inviting “the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind” to a banquet. That is, reaching out to those who are marginalized-showing love,

generosity, compassion, and forgiveness to those who are in need of it and (especially) those who don't "deserve" it from us-people who are "beggars" in relation to us. This can be at the societal level or even within our own social spheres of family and friends. This is why Jesus says that when we extend this sort of kindness and mercy towards others we are blessed "because of their inability to repay you." When we treat others in this way, we are acting truly "Godlike" in the sense that we are treating others as God treats us-simply showering unmerited love and goodness on those who don't deserve it. We are called to act in this way towards others because this is how God acts towards us. All of us are "beggars" before God. Humility allows us to recognize that and to respond with loving gratitude to God for all he has done for us-and then recognize that we need to extend what God has given to us to others. Notice that in both scenarios that Jesus mentions in his parable of the wedding banquet that you end up in the lowest position either way! The lowest position is what we all "deserve." The only question is whether we will remain there through our own pride-by refusing to recognize our dependence on God or whether we will be raised from the lowest position by God after choosing it for ourselves.

One practical way to work on humility is by specifically finding joy in the goodness of the achievements and gifts of others. So often our pride gets in the way of humility because we want to be noticed, recognized, and esteemed by others (whether in large or small ways). A great way of acting against this tendency is to work on acknowledging and rejoicing in others. St. Paul tells us in his letter to the Corinthians that this is how Christians are supposed to act as members of the body of Christ. "If one part is honored, all the parts share its joy." (1 Cor 12:26) It would be a good idea for us to work

on this in the next week. Seek out ways in which you can share in the joy of others when they are honored and recognized without worrying about how it reflects (or doesn't) reflect on you. Simply take delight in the goodness God has shown to you through another.

I'd like to end with some words of wisdom from an Irish Trappist monk named Fr. Dom Boylan who had a wonderful reflection on the virtue of humility and how to grow in it.

He writes:

"If one asks: 'How am I to become humble?' the immediate answer is 'by the grace of God,' and that is indeed the truth. Only the grace of God can give us the insight into our own condition and realization of his exaltation that make for humility. But even though it be a grace, it is a grace with which we must cooperate. The first thing to do is to ask in prayer for the grace of humility, and to ask sincerely. The second thing is to accept humiliations when they come our way...The next thing is to accept as lovingly as we can our own limitations, our own defects, our own lowliness; and even to be resigned-if we cannot be glad-when these shortcomings become known to others. Human nature being what it is...without confidence in God, it is morally impossible. Confidence and humility always go together. One of the reasons why people are so anxious to exalt themselves—to overestimate their own value and their own powers—to resent anything that would tend to lower themselves in their own esteem or in that of others—is because they see no other hope for their happiness except in themselves. That is often why they are so 'touchy,' so resentful of criticism, so impatient of opposition, so insistent on getting their own way, so eager to be known, so anxious for praise, so determined on ruling their surroundings...The attitude of the one who has true Christian humility is just

the opposite. His hope is placed in God; he sees no hope in himself. He has not to worry about getting his own way; all that matters is that God should get his way. He knows the less he has to do with the arranging of things, the more likely is it that things will turn out for the best.”

My brothers and sisters, as we approach Jesus in the Eucharist today, where God becomes humble so that he can be with us, let us ask him for the grace to grow in humility before him and before others, and to have great confidence that giving God his way in our lives will lead us to ultimate happiness! Amen!