

Year C, September 1, 2019  
12 Pentecost (Proper 17)  
Christ Church, Mexia

When I was very small, a toddler, my mother would fairly often take me on the bus to downtown for shopping, etc. And I thought I'd like to sit at the back of the bus. Of course. This was in the Jim Crow south, which meant that people of color had to sit in the back. I didn't know that, and to my mother's credit she didn't tell me that's the way it was and introduce the prejudice to me. It may be why she helped me develop the close relationship with the driver, Mr. Strong, so I would want to sit near him in order to talk with him. We are not born with prejudices and entitlements; we have to learn them.

Jesus' instructions in the gospel today are reminiscent of the Hebrew teachings of the wisdom tradition. However, I believe that he is referring to things much deeper than that. On reflection, he seems to me to be talking about humility. Jimmy Hoffa once said, "I may have my faults, but being wrong ain't one of them." It's definitely difficult to be humble at times, but it is important. As the Rev. Sam Todd says, "Humility keeps us grounded."

This thought reminded me of the story of a group of English tourists who were visiting the house where Beethoven, the great composer spent his last years. "And they came to the special room, the conservatory, where his piano sat. The guide said rather quietly to the group. 'And here is the master's piano.' One thoughtless young woman pushed her way from the back of the room all the way up, sat down on the bench, and began to play one of Beethoven's sonatas, and then paused and said to the guide and the others in the group, 'I suppose a lot of people enjoy playing this piano.' 'Well, Miss,' the guide said, 'Ignacy Paderewski was here last summer with a group and some wanted him to play. And (his) answer was, 'No, I cannot. I am not worthy.'" (Charles Swindoll) That is being grounded, and humility is one of the points that I believe Jesus is trying to make this morning.

As I said, it is an important point, because as Martin Luther observed, "Until a man (or woman) is nothing, God can make nothing out of him (or her)." You see, it is only when we can truly understand and admit our flawed nature that we can become humble and allow ourselves to be transformed by God, for God's work and for our place in the Kingdom of God.

Let me provide another example of humility, David Seamands ends his book *Healing Grace* with this story:

"For more than six hundred years the Hapsburgs exercised political power in Europe. When Emperor Franz-Josef I of Austria died in 1916, his was the last of the extravagant imperial funerals.

A procession of dignitaries and elegantly dressed court personages escorted the coffin, draped in the black-and-gold imperial colors. To the accompaniment of a military band's somber dirges and by the light of torches, the cortege descended the stairs of the Capuchin Monastery in Vienna. At the bottom was a great iron door leading to the Hapsburg family crypt. Behind the door was the Cardinal-Archbishop of Vienna.

The officer in charge followed the prescribed ceremony, established centuries before. 'Open!' he cried.

'Who goes there?' responded the Cardinal.

'We bear the remains of his Imperial and Apostolic Majesty, Franz-Josef I, by the grace of God Emperor of Austria, King of Hungary, Defender of the Faith, Prince of Bohemia-Moravia, Grand Duke of Lombardy, Venezia, Styrgia...' The officer continued to list the Emperor's thirty-seven titles.

'We know him not,' replied the Cardinal. 'Who goes there?'

The officer spoke again, this time using a much-abbreviated and less-ostentatious title reserved for times of expediency.

'We know him not,' the Cardinal said again. 'Who goes there?'

The officer tried a third time, stripping the emperor of all but the humblest of titles, 'We bear the body of Franz-Josef, our brother, a sinner like us all!'

At that, the doors swung open, and Franz-Josef was admitted."

Alan White summarizes the lesson of this particular story in this way: "In death, all are reduced to the same level. Neither wealth nor fame can open the way of salvation, but only God's grace, given to those who will humbly acknowledge their need." In a word, humility.

For the past 60 years or so, we have been under assault from Madison Avenue advertisements to judge ourselves by what we have, by what we can afford, how big our houses are, what school we attended, what car we drive, and so forth. It is no wonder, that we are obsessed with status and self-worth and the attendant privileges. It is no wonder that every sports team whom we support or for whom our children play must win, must be number one, always! Losing is not a concept we can easily accept. Mediocrity is deplorable. And what do we think of ourselves when we are not in the top tier, or at least relatively far up the ladder?

Maybe it is time that we, as Christians, take a hard look at the criteria by which we judge ourselves and others or by which we think others judge us. Perhaps it is time to judge ourselves and others by God's criteria. And Jesus, who humbled himself upon the cross, is reminding us in the final verses today that wealth, secular position, race, whatever, simply don't matter. In fact, Jesus suggests that we should be "hanging out" with the poor and marginalized of our society, showing them hospitality, raising them up to where they can feel good about themselves. That's a radical concept, but what God values. We are all children of God and loved by God, and God wants us all to prosper, to have a chance for life, liberty, and the pursuit happiness.

Robert Smith told this story, which I believe is a good way to end this sermon: "A woman leaving the worship service said to the minister, 'I enjoyed the sermon.' 'Don't thank me. Thank the Lord,' said the minister. 'It wasn't **that** good,' the lady replied." Humility keeps us grounded.

In the name of the one God, the Creator, the Word and the Spirit.

Amen.