

July 5, 2009
Lectionary 14b
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Got Pride?

It was all about Pride last Sunday in the streets of Lakeview and its environs, along with many other cities in the United States and the world. Some of the celebration continues on the Southside through this weekend with festivals celebrating the black GLBT community. (You can google information on that.) But last weekend thousands gathered up Halsted and down Broadway to proclaim “hereness” and many gathered to proclaim their support. It was a festive day.

Today our lessons take us in what appears to be a different direction, though, with a different question:

Got humility?

Paul is the most obvious reminder in our epistle lesson this morning. In the Corinthian community to which he was writing, people were really into “secret knowledge” and revealed visions. So Paul framed his language to that Corinthian community, saying that God had given him no shortage of these visions and revelations, but that in order to keep him humble, Paul was also given a “thorn in the flesh.”

A thorn in the flesh? What could **that** mean? I’ve heard it explained as everything from a mother-in-law to a speech impediment (Could it be the apostle Paul had a *lisp*?). Whatever that “thorn in the flesh” was, it was a reminder to Paul to rely on God’s grace and not on his own strength.

But in our day and age, even at twice the letters, “humility” has been a sort of four-letter word. It’s been so misunderstood, and misrepresented through caricatures like the cringing spouse or the spineless employee. Worse still, “humility” been used to manipulate, or to justify and keep in place unjust hierarchy. It’s been used to keep people in abusive relationships. But Roberta Bondi, in her powerful little book To Love as God Loves explains how the word was used among the ancient Christians, which was quite different from how most people understand it today. As she explains, for some people the word *humility* has become almost synonymous with a manipulative self-sacrifice: “Here, you take the only good chair.” The unspoken message is that “then you’ll be in my debt so I can ask something of you later.” Bondi calls that understanding of humility a gross perversion of Christianity: “Real humility brings freedom and love to its recipients, not guilt and resentment.”

Nor does humility mean letting people use you as a doormat. It’s not a voluntary taking on of low self-esteem. Bondi calls that a destructive state of mind that often produces inaction.

So what **is** humility?

Well, for the ancients it included modesty, patience of spirit, and a willingness to remove yourself from the center of the universe. Humility has as its base an understanding of your place in the larger scheme of things: you are a **child of God**. You are made in God’s image. And you are no better, yet no worse, than anyone else. Ancient Christians understood humility to be a world-transforming attitude of heart that was at its core a living out of the conviction that **all** human beings, every man, woman, and child, are beloved creatures of God. We are each and every one of us, *all* loved by God in the *midst* of our imperfections, in the *midst* of our limitations. And look at this—even **Jesus** in this morning’s gospel, had some limits on the deeds he could perform (though “only healing a few sick people” still sounds pretty good to me!). Humility and the recognition of our human limitations, though, is not to be a barrier to the knowledge that you are profoundly loved, **as is everyone else**.

One of the greatest gifts I've ever received was the gift of friendship with a man who was very much aware of his frailties-and could laugh at them. At a time when I was much younger and self-conscious about my inadequacies and imperfections, the freedom his attitude modeled for me was nothing short of life-changing. He lived out in his very *being* the knowledge that human, humor, and humility all come from the same root that translates as **humus**, earthly creatures. I learned from him the importance of taking myself with a grain of salt-and the freedom and grace that comes with that.

So humility, in this "new" (which is really old) understanding is an extremely balanced view of our creatureliness. We are-all of us-**made in the image of God**. And we are -all of us-**creatures of earth**.

The first lesson allows us to look at this on a more national scale. Israel the **people of God** are seen by God to be **a nation of rebels, impudent and stubborn**. And yet I'm sure Israel's leaders didn't see themselves this way. They were, after all, God's chosen. (I can see them walking around with the ancient equivalent of flag lapel pins on their garments. What would that be, little Torah scrolls?) But the calling of the prophet was to be the conscience of a nation, and to remind them that they were not the center of the universe either.

One of the earliest lessons my father taught me he taught me when I was about 6 or 7 years old. Back then, it was my duty, along with my brother, to shine dad's army boots every night. Luis, being left handed, would take the right boot, I would take the left. We'd lay out newspapers on the bathroom floor and do our work. One night dad came in and joined us, shining his belt buckle with Brasso as he sat at the edge of the bathtub. This was 1963. Vietnam, though maybe not quite on the consciousness of most households, was *very much* in ours, as Dad could be sent there any time. I looked up at his army uniform, hanging on the shower rod, and reading his patch that said "War is Hell," I asked him, "Papi, are we the good guys or the bad guys?"

My father's answer was so unexpected that I marvel at it even to this day. He very quietly said, "Well, we **think** we're the good guys... but so do **they**."

Now, I'm not biased or anything, but with that answer, I think my dad is presidential material! That answer revealed the sort of clear vision and open heart that comes from a humble spirit. It comes from the recognition that we are limited in our abilities and our understandings, that we are not the center of the known universe, and that there are other perspectives that need to be understood as well. Ernest Kurtz, in his book "The Spirituality of Imperfection" says that seeing our own imperfections and shortcomings is where humility starts, and that the fruit of that vision (of humility) is tolerance.

Humility: you are no less than God's beloved, among many others who are also beloved of God. On an individual, and on a national level, that's not a bad thing to remember on a weekend that holds the 4th of July, which is kind of a secular High Holy Day. We're grateful for the nation we call home, a nation that started out as an amazing experiment, and one still in progress. It's a nation we love, (full of people who are all loved by God), in the midst of a world with many other nations that are also-every last one of them-loved by God.