

“Discipleship: A Matter of Humility”

Luke 14:1, 7-14

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I often think of the three year period Jesus spent with the disciples as a discipleship training time, sort of a boot camp for would be disciples. From the time he first called them from their nets or from their farms or businesses, Jesus trained them for the ministries they would lead after the Resurrection. In the training manual for today, humility is the topic card. A Christian disciple is known in the village by his or her or their humility. As we look deeply at humility, we see that it is a kissing cousin to another virtue known as empathy. Humility and empathy are like dance partners.

Jesus taught his disciples by using parables or word pictures. A parable, or a word picture, carries a truth that stays with you and shapes your character over time. Jesus used the Parable of the Wedding Banquet for just such a purpose. He had humility on his mind!

Nowadays, when you go to a wedding reception, the bride and groom have all the guests assigned to a table. You find your name tag with your table assignment, and you find a seat at that table. But in Biblical times, there was an open-seating policy. So, it would be easy for the disciples to picture themselves arriving at a wedding banquet, spotting seats near the head table, and moving right for those places of honor. I imagine they were stunned when Jesus turned the tables on them.

“Sit in the back row!” Choose the more humble location. For in so doing, they would discover what life is all about.

It is counter-cultural to choose the way of humility. Humility requires that we see things from the other’s point of view, that we consider the needs of the other before we consider our own needs. When we choose to be humble, we’re choosing to be empathetic; we’re choosing to imagine what life is like for that other person, for that refugee, for that unemployed neighbor, for that one who seems to get bullied all the time at school. This is a quality Jesus nurtured among the disciples. He challenges them to see how their lives change, to see how the meaning of life unfolds when they assume an attitude of humility.

Our culture, on the other hand, tends to be more self-centered. The old country & western song comes to mind: “O Lord it’s hard to be humble when you’re perfect in every way; O Lord it’s hard to be humble, I get better looking each day...” I do laugh at these lyrics which I know by heart, but it’s not a song that’s found its way into our hymnal!

We can read about humility in great literature. But what we all need is people who serve as role models of humility. We tend to learn humility from our parents or from some close relative or from a friend or a teacher or a coach. I think we learn to be humble by being in the company of people who walk humbly. I think we learn to be humble by giving humility a chance, trying it on for size. Our ultimate role model is Jesus himself. He comes into the world on a mission. He humbles himself. That is, he chooses to know intimately what it’s like to be an outcast, what it’s like to be a leper, what it’s like to be always chosen last for the baseball team, what it’s like to be unloved, unappreciated, uninvited. He was constantly seeing the world through the eyes and the hearts of others. He is the picture of humility.

This is what it takes to build up the Kingdom of God. This is what it takes to build up the church family. Humility and its cousin empathy. Understanding life from the other's perspective.

One of my best teachers of these virtues was one of my Confirmation students. As many of you know, along about February, each student and teacher presents a Life Map. This is a collage of four or five pictures that indicate times or events that changed our perspective or that deepened our understanding of life. Maybe ten years ago, a girl stood up to present her Life Map. She proceeded to share with the class what it means for her to have an eating disorder. She was specific and emotional at intimate. We all listened intently. When it was time for feedback, one boy, in the back row, raised his hand; thanked her profusely for helping him to understand what life is like with an eating disorder. He felt liberated in a way, and grateful for finally being able to see things from another's point of view. I think he actually wept. It was a moment of profound humility. I am grateful to her and to him. That night, we all learned what Jesus had in mind when he suggested the disciples take a seat in the back row. We learned how life takes on new meaning when we tune in to what life is like for a neighbor. I still get goosebumps remembering that one Life Map presentation. It's why I can't imagine not being a teacher in the Confirmation ministry.

When people wonder out loud whether the Bible is still relevant, I think about the parables of Jesus, how they call us to imagine a higher moral ground, a more gentle way of relating. Does the world not hunger for more humility these days? In a way, this is what drives our aggressive mission ministry. It's hard to spend a week on a Habitat for Humanity worksite without gaining a new perspective. It's hard to cut up carrots and cabbage at Rosie's Place in Boston without seeing life from a different angle.

It's hard to sing and dance with the women of Chipoka, Malawi; knowing they have come from a place of prostitution to a place of self-respect, without gaining a new understanding on what life is all about. Humility. Empathy. When we embrace these awesome spiritual gifts, that's when we know we're living in the greatest of hope. That's how the Parable of the Wedding Banquet was speaking to me this week. Amen.