

Commentary on the Gospel for Sat, Aug 26th 2017

If you exalt yourself you will be humbled, but if you humble yourself you will be exalted.

Jesus gives us the simplest of religious messages, and yet the most profound. It is a great temptation for all of us, as we grow in our spiritual lives, to feel good about ourselves, and then to claim it for ourselves, and then to look down on others who don't appear to have what we have. Jesus uses "exalt" and "humble" in both their good and bad senses, to help us reflect on some powerful wisdom.

Lifting ourselves up - for honor, attention, praise - simply doesn't work. It is self-defeating. It looks silly and is sometimes tragic. Whenever we set ourselves up as better than everybody else, we really just set ourselves up for distrust, lack of respect, and often for ridicule. Why do we try it so often then? The respect of others - being honored and looked up to - is seductive. It's too easy, in a way. Too many people do seem to be impressed with the outward signs of self-promotion. But not for long. We can't fool all of the people, even most of the time. Most of what we do, most of what's really inside of us, ultimately becomes transparent, no matter how hard we try to keep it from view.

The "secret" to being exalted is in making ourselves "humble." Our word "humble," is from the Latin humilis - low - from humus - earth. The respect of others, the integrity that wins honor, comes from genuine simplicity. It comes from being transparently who we are. With our warts, pimples, fat, failings - all the ways we aren't attractive, together, successful, winners or powerful. Being "who we are" before God and others is more difficult than it seems. It starts with being who we are before ourselves. "Introspection" has gotten a bad name in recent years. It probably deserved it, when it came to mean a pattern of negative self absorption. But, in order to be who we are, we need to know who we are. We really need to befriend who we are.

Jesus knew that honest comfort with self opens the way for powerful graces. Denial or blindness about my own weakness or bad habits or infidelity or unreliability or lack of passion and love - my real poverty - makes very little room for grace to enter. I don't need God, if I don't really find myself "in need." A genuine self-assessment will always lead me to the gifted insight: "I'm poor, spiritually. There's an emptiness, a hunger, an unanswered invitation, a lack of integration, lots of sins of omission in my heart." There, in that humble place, I will always find the blessings Jesus promises to the "poor in spirit."

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