

Streetsville United Church
Sunday, Nov 7, 2010
Rev. John Tapscott

"TRUE HUMILITY"

Luke 18:14

Jesus said, "All who exalt themselves will be humbled, but those who humble themselves will be exalted." That's true to our experience, isn't it? I've told you about the time when I was about 10 years old and came home one Saturday with my dad from my hockey game. Sitting at the kitchen table for lunch I proudly announced to my mother, "I was outstanding today." And my father God bless him, who was always very supportive, just couldn't help himself. He said, "You sure were, out on the ice, standing around." I had exalted myself, but found myself humbled. On the other hand when I was in theological college, I received a prize for top mark in New Testament. Heavens, I didn't even know there was such a prize and wasn't working for it. I was just trying to pass the course, and in humbling myself I was exalted or at least received recognition. And now by mentioning it, I'm not being humble about it.

Jesus told a parable in which two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee, the other a tax collector, The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed, "God, I thank you that I'm not like all the bad people, or even like this tax collector over here. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income." All that was undoubtedly true. The Pharisee not a thief, rogue, adulterer or tax collector. For that everyone would be thankful. He took his duty towards God very seriously and went beyond what the law required. He was thin; his pockets were empty; he lived modestly; he rode a bicycle.

On the other hand the tax collector was overweight from dining well. His pockets were full. He lived in a large house. He drove a huge luxury SUV. He collaborated with the Romans and was well-paid by them. He would bully people to get them to pay up. A tax collector was a nasty piece of work. But this one knew himself very well. He stood far off and didn't even look up to heaven. He beat his breast, saying, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner." And Jesus shocked his listeners by saying that the tax collector was the one who went home justified, in the right with God, and not the Pharisee.

Now on the human level there was a big difference between them. One was good; the other bad. But according to Jesus, the only difference that mattered was that was that one had humility and one lacked it. Jesus said, "All who exalt themselves will be humbled, but those who humble themselves will be exalted."

And it's actually God's work. The Pharisee who exalted himself was humbled by God, but the tax collector who humbled himself was exalted by God. James says in his letter, "God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble."

Clearly then, it's good to be humble. It's a virtue we need. Let's look at what true humility is and where it comes from.

First, let's consider humility in our relationship with others. Humility is not thinking too little of yourself or what you do. A person with true humility has self-respect and healthy self-esteem. The humble person knows that God made them the unique individual that they are. They are gracious when someone complements them.

But true humility also means recognizing your dependance on others. Jesus himself called people to be with him and to help him and work with him. The most skilled surgeon in the world can not do his work without a whole network of people who make it possible. So the humble person recognizes his or her dependance on those who came before us and those who are here now. I feel very humbled and grateful on Remembrance Sunday as we remember and honour those who made sacrifices to a far greater degree than I have ever been called to do.

You know, present generations sometimes look at previous generations with a sense of arrogance. But we need humility as we look back at our ancestors. They were not as ignorant and unenlightened as we often think. They didn't have all the answers but neither do we. They can still teach us a thing or two.

Luke says that Jesus told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt. But true humility never treats others with contempt. You don't put yourself above them, or below them, for that matter. The humble person acts as if they live in a classless society. Now the Marxists spoke about that, but actually created huge gaps between the privileged class and the ordinary folk. The humble person has no time for classes. He or she is at ease with all kinds of people. The humble person doesn't have an air of superiority and entitlement. The humble person does not consider themselves better than others.

Look at Jesus. He never considered anyone beneath him or above him. He was found with lepers, with fishermen, with blind men, with a Samaritan woman, with the wealthy tax collector Zacchaeus, with the high ranking Pharisee Nicodemus, and with many others.

Furthermore, the truly humble person considers no task too low to tackle. Jesus himself took a towel and washed the disciples feet, which was the task of a household slave.

Albert Schweitzer wrote about an incident which occurred during his noble work in Africa.

"In September we got the first rains, and the cry is to bring all building timber under cover. As we have in the hospital hardly a man capable to work, I begin, assisted by the loyal helpers, to haul about beams and planks. Suddenly, I catch sight of a man in a white suit sitting by a patient he has come to visit. "Hello friend", I call out, "Won't you lend us a hand?" "I am an intellectual and don't drag wood about," he answered. "You're lucky," I reply. "I too wanted to become an intellectual, but I didn't succeed."

When you remember that Albert Schweitzer had three doctorates, the sheer humility and humour of this great man shines forth. We exalt him as a great example of what it means to have a humble spirit in relationship with others. In fact, it was a reflection of the spirit of Christ.

But now let's think of humility in our relationship with God. This is the most important kind of humility. You may fall short in humility in your relationship with others and we all do to one extent or another. But it's very important to get humility right in our relationship with God, for such humility leads to our salvation. And this is where the good Pharisee went wrong. He boasted before God, telling God all was good about himself and why he was so much better than sinners. On a human level it was true. But by comparing himself to others, the Pharisee never developed the humility before God by which he could say, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner." If the Pharisee had seen himself in the light of God's holiness, as Isaiah did in the temple, or as the tax collector apparently did, he too would have asked for God's mercy. And he too would have gone down to his home justified by God.

Right here is why the preaching of Jesus is so important. It's not just because he is the Saviour whom we trust but also because he is the one before whom we become humble before God. Before Jesus, who loves us so much and died for us, our hearts are broken. Jesus is the sinless One, the true yardstick for human life, and in his light you and I have to say, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner." Look up at the Crucified and Risen One, and your relationship with God will become marked by humility and love and faith. And you will in the right before God, going down to your home justified by Him, and dwelling in the house of the Lord forever. It's a miracle of grace.

Jesus said, "All who exalt themselves will be humbled, but those who humble themselves will be exalted." And if God humbles us, it's only so that ultimately he may exalt us as we realize our dependence on Him. Perhaps that would yet happen for the Pharisee.

But where does this virtue of humility come from? It is a very tricky virtue. As soon as you start working on it, you tend to lose it. Suppose you buy a treadmill, and work out daily for a while. You lose 5 or 10 pounds and start admiring your slim frame in the mirror. You become proud of what you have accomplished. It's the same with humility. As soon as you set out to work on it you become proud of it. And then you lose it. When you start saying, "I'm a very humble person," you're not.

Humility is almost an unconscious virtue which you're not even aware of it, though others may see it in you. It comes as you trust and follow Christ and draw close to him. Paul says, "Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God as thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, and being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross...therefore God highly exalted him and gave him the name above every name..."

Jesus was a model of humility in his relationship with God and with others. He always put himself under his Father's direction and depended on His help. He never had to pray, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner," though his baptism in the Jordan signified his identification with sinners. He came all the way down to be like us and to be with us. And he is our living Lord and Saviour whom we not only remember, but whose living presence we meet in bread and wine.

So don't strive after humility, rather welcome Jesus and allow his life to grow within you, and along with that comes the humility which was in him. Jesus humbled himself and was exalted by God, and so it happens for you and me as we abide in Christ and he in us. "For whoever exalts themselves will be humbled, but whoever humbles themselves will be exalted."