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Embracing humility

Patricia Datchuck Sánchez | Aug. 31, 2013 Spiritual Reflections

Today, God?s word speaks to us through Sirach and the Lucan Jesus -- and the theme of this word is humility. ?Humility? is derived from the Latin word *humus* or earth; the humble person has his or her feet on the ground. Levelheaded and truthful, those with humility are not the center of their own universe. Rather, they are centered on God and on others.

Twenty-Second Sunday in Ordinary Time

Sirach 3:17-18, 20, 28-29
Psalm 68
Hebrews 12:18-19, 22-24
Luke 14:1, 7-14

In his book *Everyday Greatness* (Rutledge Hill Press, 2006), Stephen R. Covey included a chapter on humility in which he quoted Groucho Marx. Marx told the story of a nurse so taken with her own beauty that each time she took a man?s pulse, she subtracted 10 points to compensate for what her looks did to his heartbeat. Covey also quoted Sam Walton (the founder of Wal-Mart), who said, ?It is unhealthy to marinate in your own press clippings.? In a like manner, Frank Tyger advised, ?Swallow your pride. It?s non-fattening.?

After his epic saga *Roots* was published in 1976, Alex Haley said that in his office he had a picture of a turtle sitting on a fencepost. When he looked at it, Haley remembered a lesson taught to him by his friend John Gaines: ?If you see a turtle on top of a fencepost, you know he had some help.? Said Haley, ?Anytime I start thinking, ?Wow, isn?t this marvelous what I?ve done!? I look at that picture and remember how this turtle -- me -- got up on that post.?

Humorous stories like these convey the truth about the necessity of humility. In their quest to convey that same truth, the author of Sirach chose a sapiential genre, while Jesus opted for parables.

Sirach (or Ecclesiasticus) was a corporate effort. Written in Hebrew in 180 B.C. by Jesus ben Sira, the work was translated into Greek by his grandson, Jesus ben Eleazar, some time after 132 B.C. A keen observer of the human condition, ben Sira wrote in order to help his contemporaries maintain their faith and traditions in ever-changing times. In a world not unlike our own, when many were eager to make a name for themselves and leave their mark in the annals of history, the great sage advised otherwise: ?Conduct your affairs with humility ... humble yourself the more, the greater you are.?

Approximately two centuries later, another Jesus, son of Joseph and Mary, Son of God, would instruct his

disciples along the same lines. Instead of jockeying for seats of honor at a banquet, the followers of Jesus are to take the lowest place and leave the giving of honor to the discretion of the host. As Bob Buchanan has pointed out, we must take care not to waste Jesus? lesson (*The Abingdon Preaching Annual*, Abingdon Press, 2001). The human ego could easily convert this instruction about humility into a new strategy for self-aggrandizement. Taking the lowest seat out of humility is one thing; taking the lowest seat as a way to move up is another. Jesus was not giving his disciples a gimmick for self-promotion. This lesson becomes a sham if there is a mad, competitive rush for the lowest place as we bend our ears toward the host, waiting for the call to ascend. True humility takes the lowest place and is content to be there without hoping to play musical chairs for a higher position.

If the wisdom of Jesus and ben Sira were allowed to infuse the world of politics, how might that change things? Would there be more truth and fewer unkept promises? Would there be less mudslinging? Would debates be a time for posturing or for setting forth principles?

How might such wisdom affect the economics of a nation? Would the trickle-down theory prevail, or would decisions be based on a preferential option for the poor? How would a healthy dose of humility affect the legal system? The workplace? Our institutions of learning?

More to the point, how might society be affected if the followers of Jesus allowed humility to uproot our arrogance, anger, greed and aggression, our excess of pride and ambition? With our feet on the ground and our eyes fixed on Jesus, we are challenged to be truly who we are at all times, in all places, with everyone we meet.

Authentic humility can be an elusive quality. Once you think you have it, you don?t. Remember the turtle on the fencepost.

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