

Proper 17, Year C

Proverbs 25:6-7

Psalm 112

Hebrews 13:1-8,15-16

Luke 14:1,7-14

Do not put yourself forward in the king's presence
or stand in the place of the great;
for it is better to be told, "Come up here,"
than to be put lower in the presence of a noble.

Proverbs 25:6-7

On the surface, it might seem that today's scripture readings amount to little more than a lesson on dinner etiquette: *How to Behave In the Presence of a Noble* by Jesus of Nazareth, Messiah of Manners.

But we know better. We know it goes deeper. We know that our God is not in the business of domesticating us. In fact, our God could give a rip about strengthening your manners or helping you conform to the standards of polite society.

No, our God is subversive. His kingdom is rowdy. And what he's doing in today's scriptures is the same thing he's trying to do to us everyday: to shake us up, to turn us upside down, and to show us a life that actually matters.

"Do not put yourself forward," he says.

This isn't about manners.

This is about humility.

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For many of us, "humility" is a dirty word, but it doesn't have to be.

Think of someone you've known to whom you can easily point and say, "*He* was a humble man. *She* was a humble woman." There aren't many out there, but we've all known at least one or two. Who in your life has shown you the grace of true humility? What were they like?

In my life I can think of several, but one of the most surprising examples was a college student I knew when I was a chaplain at Georgia Southern University. One night at the Episcopal Center, our group was talking about parents and the lessons we've learned from them. One soft-spoken young lady said, "The most important thing my father ever taught me was, 'You're not special.'"

"WHAT?!" we all responded in disbelief. "How could your father say that to you?" In the age of Mr. Rogers, Barney the Dinosaur, everybody-gets-a-trophy, and the-gospel-of-nice, such a thing from the mouth of a parent seemed anathema.

Calmly, quietly, and with a gentle, centered presence, she said, “Well, I’m not. I’m not special. His point was that when I’m hurting, I need to remember that I’m not the only one in the world who’s hurting. When I’m happy, I should remember that there are others in need of happiness. The world does not revolve around me. I am not special.”

It has taken me years to appreciate fully the great humility and deep wisdom of this college sophomore.

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If you look for the common thread between those who live a life of true humility, you find that:

- Humility is not the same as being polite. A person can be rude and still be humble.
- Humility is not the same as being timid. A person can be bold and still be and humble.
- Humility is not the same as being poor. A person can be rich and still be and humble.

No, the common thread that ties together people of true Christian humility is this:

They are *free*.

When we accept the invitation that Jesus offers us daily—i.e. when we stop living for our own interests and start living for his—we become free:

- Free from the awful, procrustean standards we set for our own lives.
- Free from worrying all the time about what others might think of us.
- Free from trying desperately to make it seem as though we have it all together in our businesses, in our marriages, and in our homes.
- Free from showing off our selfies, and tweeting what we had for dinner, and posting endless photos of our children and grandchildren living seemingly perfect lives.
- Free from anxiety about whether people will be impressed when they visit our church.
- Free from sweatin’ the small stuff.
- Free from the captivity of control.

When God’s word says, “Do not put yourself forward in the king’s presence,” he is not slapping you down. Instead, he is saying, “I, the King, have already brought my Presence to you.” Jesus—who was born in a manger, was raised in the sticks, lived without a penny to his name, and died the most shameful death possible—has already brought the greatness of God to us wrapped in the form of total humility. He has done all the work. *We* have nothing left to prove.

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To that end, maybe a little story will do.

Once there was a good and decent man who was told, “Great news! The Bishop is coming to visit our town today, and he wishes to dine at your house tonight.” The man was beside himself.

“The Bishop!” he said. “What wonderful news! I’ve never even met a bishop before, and this one has chosen to dine at my home? I must go and prepare at once.”

The man left work early, cleaned his home, pressed the linens, polished the silver, brought out the good china, and prepared the feast. As evening came, he lit the candles on his table and waited.

The candles burned; the shadows lengthened; and he drummed his fingers nervously on the table. Finally, a knock came at the door.

He sprang up, flung wide the door, and stared at what he found. There on his doorstep was a most unassuming man: short in stature, balding, pot-bellied, ruddy-faced and sweaty, wearing a homely shirt and tattered shoes.

“Who are you?” the man asked curtly. But without awaiting a reply, he quipped, “No matter. I’m sorry, but I’m quite busy this evening. If you need help, the soup kitchen is that way. I’m sure they can assist you. Goodbye,” and he slammed the door.

Back in his dining room, the candles burned lower; the shadows lengthened further; and he drummed his fingers nervously on the table. Again a knock came at the door, and again he flung it open.

It was the same humble visitor.

“Listen,” said the man, “I’ve told you, I am quite busy tonight. I am expecting an important guest. If you need help, the parish church is down the other way. The priest is there, and I’m sure he can help you. Goodbye,” and again he slammed the door.

Once again in his dining room, the candles had burned down to nothing. The shadows were all gone, for evening had arrived. Still, he drummed his fingers nervously on the table, and for a third time, a knock came at the door.

To his surprise, he found the same short, balding, pot-bellied, ruddy-faced man, but this time he was wearing a tall, ornate bishop’s mitre. Over his shoulders hung the most beautiful gold damask cope.

“B-b-b-bishop!” the man exclaimed. “Your Grace, I am so sorry! I had no idea! All this time, I thought you were someone else. Please, come in, come in. Sit down. I have everything prepared for you.”

The Bishop, with a kind and knowing smile, walked into the dining room and stood at the head of the table. “Please, Your Grace, sit down.” But the Bishop did not sit. Instead, he gently removed his mitre and placed it on the table. He unclasped his golden cope and laid it carefully over the chair. Then, without a word, he turned for the door.

“Bishop, wait! Please! Where are you going?” the man cried.

The Bishop turned to look at the man with that same kind, knowing smile on his lips. “My friend,” he said, “it is clear that it was never *me* you actually wanted to meet. It was my robes. So, here they are. I leave you with my blessing, and with what I hope will be a delightful supper for you.”

And he turned, opened the door, and left.

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God is nearer than you know. Always.

Will you have the humility to put yourself aside . . . and let him in?

Amen.