

Trinity XVII Sermon by Bishop Michael Hawkins

By the Right Reverend Michael W. Hawkins

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They chose the chief seats. This is common and natural. How many of you, when you go to a movie, play or concert, try to find the most uncomfortable seats with the worst view? How happy are we, when we get seated in a restaurant just outside the bathroom door? Choosing the best seats. How much of human life, and the course and history of the world, is nothing but this, an endless grown-up game of musical chairs, everyone fighting over scraps of worldly glory, power, preference and prestige? And we see this in the Church at large, and on the local level as well.

I recall, in my family, fighting with my brothers over the front seat of the car. But the real battle, the final conflict, was over who would end up in the back, on top of the dreaded hump. Now, Jesus tells us in this Gospel, “But it shall not be so among you, take the hump, gladly.”

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The rules of the kingdom are counter-intuitive for sinners, and Jesus seems to turn our worldly thinking upside down. Yet, there is some worldly wisdom in the parable. We read in Proverbs 25.6-7: “Put not forth thyself in the presence of the king, and stand not in the place of great men; for better it is that it be said unto thee, Come up hither; than that thou shouldest be put lower in the presence of the prince whom thine eyes have seen.”

But these are not just words of natural wisdom. This is a parable, a parable of the kingdom. And it was told to a specific audience. Jesus is at supper, in the home of a prominent Pharisee. And there is a hardness of heart in the dinner guests, which is revealed in the episode of the man with dropsy. They are watching him, with that unmistakable attitude of fault-finding. The sick man's case raises a question of interpretation of the Sabbath law. As an aside, our Lord's words seem to allow for nurses and tow-truck drivers to work on the Sabbath, the very same kind of essential

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services we once identified as permissible to work on the Lord's Day.

But how are this story of the healing and the parable related? Dropsy is a symptom, not a disease, a painful and paralyzing swelling of the limbs that would make a person puffed up and very sensitive. Sound familiar? Puffed up, that sounds like an exact physical reflection of the spiritual disease of pride, a paralyzing swelling that makes you puffed up and overly sensitive. And even more interesting, this swelling is caused by a failure of the heart.

Jesus heals the man with dropsy, but would the rest of the dinner guests be healed of their inner swelling, their spiritual pride? Our Lord gives them a clear diagnosis and prognosis. The diagnosis is self-seeking and self-promotion. The prognosis is that this will lead, not to glory and greatness, but to some final humiliation. Whoever promotes himself will be demoted.

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Pride is sin. It is the sin which denies and contradicts the graciousness and goodness of God. It is pride which would steal from God what he would have otherwise freely given. It is the original sin and every actual one since. What are the stories of the Garden of Eden and Babylon about, but humanity's attempts at seizing the chief seats?

Humility is the very opposite of pride. It is opposed to the fault-finding attitude of the Pharisees in the Gospel. In relation to our neighbour, pride involves putting others down, in an attempt to push ourselves up. This pride leads to death and damnation, to final humiliation.

But it is not too strong a statement, to say that humility is our salvation - not our humility, though, but the humility of Jesus Christ. For he is the meek one who has inherited the earth, he is the humble one who has been exalted. “ He, though God, took on him the form

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of a servant, and as a man, he humbled himself, even to the death of the cross. And God has exalted him above all and given him the name above every name, that at the name of Jesus, every knee should bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father.” His humility is our salvation, and it must become ours, for every knee shall bow.

Humility, though, is not some sick self-loathing or anxiety-driven self-doubt. It is honest self-knowledge, first as a creature and then as a sinner before God. For the Christian, it also involves the constant recognition and dependence on the grace of God. Whatever good I am or do, is all a result of God's grace in me. Humility, then, is to know and feel, deep within, that there is one God and Father of all, who is above all. And it is in this humility alone that we may come to God. I love the Prayer of Humble Access, which teaches us that the only access to God is by humility. The only way is humility.

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The Church of the Nativity, in Bethlehem, has a wonderful object lesson for this point. While historians disagree on why, the door into the dark, mysterious and ancient shrine is extremely small and low. Anyone but a little child has to bow to get in. What a beautiful and providential sign. You must bow, and humble your stiff, proud neck, to get in. The lesson of the Communion in our Prayer Book is that God gives grace to the humble. We are taught to come to God empty-handed and open-hearted: “Nothing in my hands I bring; simply to thy cross I cling.” We bring nothing but our need.

Yet this humility before God must also find expression toward our neighbour, and especially within the fellowship of believers. So in our Gospel reading, Jesus teaches us that the Kingdom of God is by invitation only, but that it must be received. We can only enter if we receive it as a little child. And in our Epistle, Paul lays out the necessity for humility within the Church. Church unity and peace require humility, lowliness, meekness, longsuffering and

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forbearance. Peter writes, “All of you be subject one to another, and be clothed with humility; for God resisteth the proud and giveth grace to the humble. Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God that he may exalt you in due time.”

This, Paul says, is our calling: to follow the Lord Jesus, who humbled himself, and who has been highly exalted. So let us come humbly together before God, who is gracious and merciful. And trusting only in the merit of Jesus Christ who died for us, we shall find ourselves lifted up. And let us pray and seek, that by the Holy Spirit, we might be clothed with humility, with the humility of our own dear Lord and Saviour. Amen.