

“Humbled to Be Honored”

Rev. Ken McGarry at The First Congregational Church in Stoneham, Massachusetts
August 28, 2022 – Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost
Jeremiah 2:4-13; Luke 14:1, 7-14

“I am *humbled* to be a winner!”

“Accepting this award is so *humbling!*”

How many times have you heard someone claiming to be *humbled* such as this while accepting a prestigious award, receiving some lofty accolade, or hoisting a championship trophy? Yes, way too often these days we hear the lofty claiming to be humbled by the experience of being lifted high in glory even while they are being hoisted up. Probably, what these winners and champions really mean when they say they are humbled in their exaltation is actually something different. Maybe they actually mean they feel completely unworthy to receive the honor or perhaps they mean they are grateful for those who helped make the award happen. They may feel a lot of things, but humble is probably not one of them!

For being humble is being low or small, and what makes a person sense or experience lowliness is what is truly humbling. Sitting alone in a prison cell is humbling. Receiving an awful diagnosis from the doctor is humbling. Feeling unable to break free from a chemical addiction is humbling. Having a relationship break and crumble into pieces is humbling. Struggling in school is humbling. Losing a job is humbling. Having no home is humbling. Not having enough food to feed yourself or your family is humbling.

We’ve all had some humbling experiences in our lives, and I’m sure that if we were to actually share openly and honestly with one another this morning, we would reveal that there are plenty of things going on in our lives at this moment that are truly humbling. As a church community, there is much that we experience together that humbles us. As a nation, there is much that we are going through together that brings us low. And as part of a human family of almost eight billion people, there are many global problems that we are facing that humble us.

We are humbled, but we should not feel like dirt. For, though we are made from the lowly dust of the earth, we have been lovingly crafted by a good and wise Creator, who has breathed life into us and gives us all we need not only to be sustained, but to rise from the earth. We are more than humbled, lowly lumps of clay; we are all elevated as beloved children of God.

One of the great problems we experience as a human family, though, is that we often fail to recognize that what makes us more than dirt and can help us feel better than dirt is a gift from a loving and gracious God. But, rather than giving thanks to God and humbly trusting in God's grace, we rely upon our own finite wisdom and strength and choose to live independently of God and the ways set out for us by God, believing a fiction in thinking that we can pull ourselves up from our bootstraps without being surrounded by a care-taking community. This leads us too often into considering ourselves to be apart from others and into seeing and treating others not as fellow, beloved children of God, equal in the eyes of our Creator, but as creatures of dirt that are somehow lowlier than we are.

We rank ourselves based on what we or our families have attained or accomplished, with those obtaining the most power and wealth being considered to be the most valuable and important. Right here in this room -- many years ago -- we use to have assigned seating, with those who were considered to be most important, or who had the most money, being seated front and center where they could be seen and admired by all. If you couldn't afford to pay to sit in one of the better areas (and these seats were not free!), you could not sit up here, but maybe further back or upstairs. In some of our old churches in New England, like the Episcopal Old North Church in Boston, the names of the families who purchased seats are still posted on the doors of their pew boxes, with the name plates of some of those people being the only reminders of them as their bodies returned to the earth many generations ago.

While times and traditions have changed, and in our churches we no longer sell pew boxes or reserve the best seats for the most esteemed members of our society, we are still ever eager to acquire wealth and prestige and to be recognized as having more of these things than our neighbors. And we restlessly

try to make our way forward in life and climb into the better positions ahead of us.

The message we receive in today's gospel lesson from Luke offers us a better, loftier way of living. In today's story, Jesus is dining in the home of a leader of the Pharisees, a prominent person among prominent people, when he reminds them of the wisdom of their own tradition, found throughout the Hebrew scriptures, that God brings down the exalted and lifts up the lowly, and so we should not seek to exalt ourselves, sitting at the seat at the banquet reserved for the loftiest and most esteemed, but we should seek, rather, to humble ourselves, letting others sit in the better seats ahead of us.

Perhaps we could do this best by using our energies and other resources not to acquire the best seats in life, but to do the work of bringing others, especially those most humbled and lowly, to the banquet and then seating them ahead of us.

This kind of extravagant hospitality is what we strive to practice here. This is why we seek to use our privileged place and our wealth to bless others. This is why we freely include all in receiving the grace of God when we gather at God's table. This is why a few of us will be going to a local nursing home tomorrow to offer a worship service and communion to those who cannot come to us. This is why we invest our resources in the work of feeding of our community. This is why we use our facility as a house to help children and their families to thrive and grow.

So, if you're feeling humbled this morning, not by being a winner, but because you're going through some difficulty, know that you belong here, front and center, beloved of God and beloved of this community. And if you're feeling lofty this morning, because of your own good work and the work of others, realize that this is a place for you to lift up others. Together, may we all be humbled and so be honored and blessed by God. Amen.