

Sermon for Sunday, October 23, 2016
St James Episcopal Church, St James NY
The Very Rev. Canon Dr. Raewynne J. Whiteley

“All who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.”

So ends Jesus’ parable
of the Pharisee
and the tax collector.

It’s a typical Jesus parable, beginning as we would expect
and then turning everything
upside down.

Two people go to pray,
and you could hardly imagine
two more different people.

One is a Pharisee,
well respected in the community,
a person of public faith
and likely deep piety.
He kept all the rules,
was faithful
and generous.

And then there was a tax-collector,
one of the most hated people in the community.
He worked for the Roman overlords,
collecting money from the people of his own community
and even his own family,
required to collect
an officially billed amount
to send to the Romans
but free to set his own salary on top of that, with no accountability,
a scheme ripe
for picking.

Jesus imagines
the two of them there in the temple,
each come to pray.

And remember, in those days, the tradition was
to pray aloud.

If you visited the temple
you would be surrounded
by a murmur of sound.

So the Pharisee,
he begins to pray.
In the ordinary way of things,
you would expect him to give thanks for God's blessings,
ask for God's mercy,
and be done.
Except that he begins
by comparing himself
with the tax collector he sees across the room.
And makes sure that God - and everyone else - knows
that he is better than that man.
This isn't so much a prayer
as a stump speech,
and he wants everyone there to know
how good
and important
he is.

And then there's the tax collector.
He doesn't like going to the temple.
He knows
that people will keep their distance,
some may even
turn away.
But somewhere deep inside
there is a compulsion
to go pray.
and he asks God
for mercy.

This is not one of those times
when Jesus asks his followers
to work out the meaning of the parable
for themselves.
Because I suspect that he knows
that they are going to get stuck.

Stuck because
 their assumptions about who is important and who is faithful
 and who is good
 are going to make it hard for them
 to work out
 what this is all about.
 And so he tells them straight.
 All who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be
 exalted.”

Being humble, humility,
 is not something
 that we talk about a lot,
 in the church
 or anything else.
 It's not really part
 of our cultural discourse.
 And I suspect
 we're not even sure
 what it means.

Perhaps you've sung
 “Mid pleasures and palaces though we may roam
 Be it ever so humble, there's no place like home”
 John Howard Payne

And there, I suspect, what we assume
 is that humble means
 ordinary.
 We compare and contrast
 what we have
 with some imagined palace
 and say, “we're just ordinary”.

And then there's
 Uriah Heap
 in Charles Dickens' “David Copperfield.”
 He is introduced
 in this way:

“I saw a cadaverous face appear at a small window on the ground floor ... and quickly disappear. The low arched door then opened, and the face came out. It was quite as cadaverous as it had looked in the window, though in the grain of it there was that tinge of red which is sometimes to be observed in the skins of red-haired people. It belonged to a red-haired person - a youth of 15, as I take it now, but looking much older – whose hair was cropped as close as the closest stubble; who had hardly any eyebrows, and no eyelashes, and eyes of a red-brown, so unsheltered and unshaded, that I remember wondering how he went to sleep. He was high-shouldered and bony; dressed in decent black, with a white wisp of a neckcloth; buttoned up to the throat; and had a long, lank, skeleton hand, which particularly attracted my attention ...”

Uriah Heap

is proud to be humble.

“When I was quite a young boy,” he tells David Copperfield, “I got to know what umbleness did, and I took to it. I ate umble pie with an appetite. I stopped at the umble point of my learning, and says I, ‘Hard hard!’ When you offered to teach me Latin, I knew better. ‘People like to be above you,’ says father, ‘keep yourself down.’ I am very umble to the present moment, Master Copperfield, but I’ve got a little power!”

Often we think of humility, of humbleness
as being tied to being self-demeaning, putting yourself down,
whether because you really have poor self esteem,
or simply have been taught
that this is what you do.

But the etymology of the word humble, the origins
of the word itself,
is the latin word ‘humus’,
which means earth,
that rich dark matter
in which all manner of plants and organisms grow.
Dirt.

Humility
is about being connected
to the earth.
Grounded.

And that takes us
all the way back to Genesis.

You may not know
but there are two stories of the creation
of human beings.

The first is in chapter one,
on the sixth day,
when God said, ‘Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.’
So God created humankind in his image,
in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them.”

But then in chapter two
we have a another story
of the creation of human beings,
another way of telling
how God created us.

“In the day that the Lord God made the earth and the heavens, when no plant of the field was yet in the earth and no herb of the field had yet sprung up—for the Lord God had not caused it to rain upon the earth, and there was no one to till the ground; but a stream would rise from the earth, and water the whole face of the ground— then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being. And the Lord God planted a garden in Eden, in the east; and there he put the man whom he had formed.”

And what is interesting about this version
is the language that is used.

In English
it’s not so clear,
but in Hebrew
it’s very noticeable.

Verse 4 says ,

“then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being.”

In Hebrew that reads,

וַיִּצְרָךְ יְהוָה אֱלֹהִים אֶת־הָאָדָם עֲפָרָם מִן־הָאָדָם וַיְחַיֵּהוּ וַיִּפְּחֵהוּ נְשֵׁם חַיִּים וַיִּבְרָא יְהוָה אֱלֹהִים אֶת־הָאָדָם לְבַפֵּי שַׁמַּיְתָה

Did you hear that word
adam?

Adam, the name that we give to the first human being,
is a shortened form of the word
adamah,
adamah
which means dust, or dirt, or earth.
So we could just as well read it,
“then the Lord God formed earth creature
from the earth.”

We are creatures of the earth.
And at the same time
we have been breathed alive
with God’s breath
and made in God’s image.
That is what it means to be humble,
to know that we are from the earth,
and from God.

Both incredibly ordinary
and incredibly precious.

It’s perhaps not surprising
that the next story Luke tells
after the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector
is the story of how people were bringing children to Jesus
to be blessed by him.
And the disciples
were blocking the way.
“He’s too busy;
the children should stay home.”
And Jesus calls the children over,
and says
“Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them;
for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs.
Truly I tell you,
whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child
will never enter it.”

Because
this is what humility looks like.
Children know
that they are precious
but also
This
is the illustration
the meaning
of the parable.

It's always tempting in a parish
to have a kind of unofficial ranking of people,
and especially
of their opinions.
That person gives a lot:
we should listen to them.
This person does so much:
they should have a bigger say.
Those people
have been here so long:
we have to make looking after them a priority.
These people don't continue much:
why are we spending so much time and energy on them.

No,
says Jesus.
All of us
are made from the earth.
All of us
are created in God's image.
All of us are recipients
of God's grace.

So remember who you are.
Listen to one another.
pray for one another.
Serve one another.
And celebrate God's grace
given to all of us.