

# 22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year C

Br. Samuel Springuel

1 September, 2019

**1<sup>st</sup> Reading** Ecclesiasticus 3:17–18,20,28–29

**Responsorial Psalm** Psalm 68:4–5,6–7,10–11

**2<sup>nd</sup> Reading** Hebrews 12:18–19,22–24A

**Gospel** Luke 14:1,7–14

We live in an age of celebrity. There are television shows and magazines dedicated to chronicling even the most insignificant events in the lives of famous people. Even your regular news sources spend time talking about the who-did-what of the who's-who. On top of that, YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and the myriad other forms of social media allow everyone to be their own PR department, constantly searching out more hits, likes, followers, and that proverbial 15 minutes of fame. If you haven't made it yet, then you're "the next big thing," and if you aren't that either then you're trying hard to make it a reality.

Despite this, the language of humility hasn't been lost. Politicians regularly say that they are "humbled" that their constituents saw fit to elect them. Movie and television stars are "humbled" that people would spend time watching them on the screen. And then there's the whole concept of a humblebrag, in which someone who in reality wants to brag about their life goes through the effort of disguising that brag as a complaint or self-deprecating comment as if that will make it sound more palatable. You know, the person who complains that the wine served in first-class had gone sour or the person who apologizes that Chinese is not one of the dozen languages they know. Being humble clearly still has value in our celebrity obsessed culture to the point that people will try to fake it.

So what does it mean to be truly humble? One would think that as a Benedictine this question would be easy for me to answer. After all, Benedict is sometimes called the Doctor of Humility. Chapter 7 of his rule is dedicated to the concept, describing the 12 steps of humility. At 1,214 words, it is the longest of his chapters. The two next longest chapters are the Prologue, at 769 words, and Chapter 2, The Qualities of an Abbot, at 694 words. Outside of Chapter 7, a form of the word "humility" occurs 23 more times. The concept is clearly important, one might even say foundational, to Benedict's idea of a monk. As a monk it should be something I understand, right?

And I suppose to a certain extent I suppose I do. I can tell you how the Latin word "humilitas" shares the same root as the word "humus", the word for earth. This indicates the dual nature of the word, a dual nature that can be seen in English in the difference between "humility" and "humiliate." "Humility" is about having an earthy quality, being authentic and natural. It goes to one's

core and grounds everything the humble person does. “Humiliate,” on the other hand, is to put some one else down. It is to walk over them and treat them like dirt. The one who is humiliated is made to feel worthless, dirt cheap, dirty. Such humiliations are imposed from the outside. Further, they are seldom truthful, but rather the product of bias or selfishness on the part of the one doing the imposing. True humility is realistic about one own’s abilities and limitations and has very little to do with judging others or “putting them in their place.”

I can also tell you how humility is considered the countering virtue to pride. The one who is prideful thinks themselves better than others, to be independent, perhaps even from God. The one who is humble, on the other hand, acknowledges both their abilities and limitations. They are willing to withhold judgement, to let others speak for themselves with their own words and deeds. The humble one realizes their dependence on others, especially God, and is properly thankful for the presence of others in their life.

Even in these short descriptions of humility, however, I’ve run something of a risk. The more one tries to prescribe certain behaviors as being characteristic of the humble person, as Jesus does in the Gospel, as Benedict does in his Rule, the less likely some who follow those prescriptions are to actually achieve humility. For the Pharisees whom Jesus is rebuking in the Gospel, the goal of their behavior is social recognition. They brashly seek to take the most prominent place at the feast. They are the first century equivalent of today’s attention seekers. For people like them, it’s very easy to twist Jesus’s advice to take the lowest place into a sort of race for the bottom. They might seek out the lowest place at the banquet as a means of “forcing” their host into recognizing them and raising them up. Instead of seeking to push themselves forward, they seek to have others push them forward, but the motivation is the same: that desire for social recognition.

Now you might say that this idea is no where present in today’s gospel, and you’d be right about that. But this is not the only time that the moral of today’s parable appears on Jesus’s lips: “For every one who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.” In just a couple of chapters, the end of October as the Lectionary puts it, Jesus will tell another parable, the one about the Pharisee and the Publican, which ends with the same line. If you’ll recall, in that parable the Pharisee thanks the Lord that he is not like other people; that he fasts and tithes and does all the right things. His prayer is a humblebrag. His thanking the Lord is a pretense for saying how “good” he is. He has twisted the teaching on humility into an occasion for pride. And while that particular Pharisee may simply be a character in a story, the audience listening, whom Jesus was addressing, was, and is, very real.

We ourselves are called to be humble by Jesus, not in the phony way that seems to be all around us, but authentically, really, humble. Let us pray for his help and guidance, lest we succumb to the temptations of our age.