

**Proper 20B – September 20, 2015**  
**Proverbs 31:10-31; Psalm 1; James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a; Mark 9:30-37**  
**By The Rev. Kevin D. Bean**

**Genuine Humility and Authentic Pride**

Jesus asked his disciples, “What were you arguing about on the way?” But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest.” Jesus again had tried to tell his disciples that he would suffer and die and then rise again. But again, they just weren’t listening. Jesus might as well have been talking about the weather. They had been arguing about who was the greatest among them, not even considering that the greatest among them might be Jesus himself.<sup>i</sup> Today we encounter the disciples’ self-righteousness having gotten the better of them—combined with their jockeying for position, their envy and jealousy of one another, and their selfish ambition—leaving them a rather pathetic prideful bunch.<sup>ii</sup>

Now, humility is the converse of pride, not its opposite, necessarily. Using an analogy from Frederick Buechner, humility is often confused with the false modesty, or self-deprecation, of saying, for example, that “you’re not much of a [card] player, when you know perfectly well, that you are. Conscious or otherwise, this kind of humility is a form of gamesmanship. [And] if you really aren’t much of a [card] player, you’re apt to be rather proud of yourself for admitting it so humbly. This kind of humility is [just] a form of low comedy.”<sup>iii</sup> False modesty and humble posturing are versions of the same attitude that underlies distorted pride. And the so-called humility that is simply low self-esteem is also not true humility. For genuine humility is like authentic pride. It does not “consist of thinking ill of yourself, but [rather], of not thinking of yourself much differently from the way you’d be apt to think of anybody else. [Authentic pride and genuine humility are the capacities] for being no more and no less pleased when you play your own hand well, than when your opponents do.”<sup>iv</sup> Love your neighbor as yourself. Love yourself as your neighbor.

In our age of public relations, 24/7 satellite broadcasting, the Internet and a hundred other ways to get your “fifteen minutes of fame,” as it were, it has become nearly impossible to believe that what’s really important is marked by a genuine humility.<sup>v</sup> In our day, it is the arrogant, the holier-than-thous, the phonies, the shallow, the killjoys, the bigots and shouters and blamers; the haters of TV, talk radio, the blogosphere or incendiary viral videos, or partisan purveyors of un-truths, who more often than not wear the fancy clothes and go riding in sleek luxury models marked Zealot or Crusader or Jihadist. And the humble ones, the ones who stand a chance of being saved by God, because they know they don’t stand a chance of being saved by anyone else including themselves—well, they go around looking like the harried parent, the tired breadwinner, the recovering alcoholic, the senior on a limited budget, the war refugee, because that is simply who they are.<sup>vi</sup> When we deal with the issues and people in our personal relationships *and* in society at large, we are called to make the principles of love and justice effective as far as possible. Yet we cannot escape the conclusion that society as such is often brutal and that our acting on these principles may in our short lives be never more than tiny seeds or specks of leaven in it. Some large and powerful social, economic, political, and religious

forces at work today seem hardly qualified by really ethical considerations. If we can do nothing else, we can bear witness to God until the day that bitter or even catastrophic experience will force individuals and institutions and nations to a humility which we do not now possess. To do this is to act with the truest humility and most appropriate pride we can muster.

In our gospel, when Jesus asks about the ridiculous squabble over which disciples thought they were the greatest, he teaches them, first by saying, “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.” But since they seem so often to get distracted while he’s speaking, he then gives them a powerful visual lesson—a serious illustration—by taking hold of a small child, and presenting the child to them. He says, in essence, that unless they can receive and relate fully to someone like this little one who has little power, and no prestige or pretense, then don’t bother to argue who is the greatest.

In other contexts, this child might have been put forward to represent innocence, or trusting dependence, or childlike simplicity. But those are not the points Jesus is making in this story. Children in Jesus’ time were more or less “invisible” people. They were expendable. They had no status, no rights. Although many parents loved their children as we hear in other stories, most parents saw their role as that of toughening their children for the hard lives ahead of them. Children worked, for little or no pay, often involuntarily from a very young age. If they weren’t working outside the home, they stayed with parents, helping with chores. Children were taught to endure suffering, and were often given harsh methods of discipline. In our day, we can see such children in the faces of child soldiers, or child laborers, or child prostitutes in many parts of our world, or in neglected and abused or otherwise invisible children closer to home. And so, in this story, Jesus was using the child to demonstrate status. While the disciples argued about who was the greatest, Jesus shows them one who is the lowest on the totem pole—a child—symbolic of the lowest status and of powerlessness. He is saying that we achieve real status by welcoming the one who has no status. We receive God and Jesus when we welcome the “invisible” persons in our society, when we reach out to and serve those below us on the status ladder. And unless we can welcome the most vulnerable among us and put any prerogatives of power or position, prestige or privilege we have into a right relationship with them, then we will never understand who is the greatest. It’s interesting to note that in the language Jesus spoke – Aramaic – the word *talya* means both “servant” and “child.” Such a word play in today’s gospel reading links Jesus’ teaching of being a servant with his illustration of putting the child in their midst.

Jesus makes the point that God cannot be received by, nor can God bestow any notion of greatness or being first or exceptional, upon any person or group or nation that doesn’t enter into a spirit of being servant and friend and brother or sister to others.<sup>vii</sup> Here’s a modern parable of what I mean, one I may have shared before. You may have heard about the amazing accomplishment at an Olympic event. I’m not referring to the Olympics or the Paralympics, as exciting as those were. I’m not referring to the world record accomplishments of any particular individual who as the superstar winner left everyone else in the pool or on the track as an “also ran.” No, I’m referring to the Olympics that has as its prefix the word “Special.” A few years ago, in one of the races in the Special

Olympics, all the runners were lined up, and the gun went off. Fairly early in the race, there was one runner who started to take the lead and kept it. On the final lap, the lead runner was well out in front followed by all the rest stretching back several hundred yards. As the lead runner rounded the final turn and was headed to sure victory, he looked back and saw that one of the runners way back had just fallen. Instead of racing to the finish line, the lead runner stopped suddenly, turned and walked back to the runner that had fallen. Amazingly, all the other runners stopped as well and turned their attention to the fallen runner. Then, spontaneously, the lead runner lifted the fallen runner to his feet; and then at that moment they clasped hands and started running, joining all the other runners in clasped hands and they all crossed the finish line at the same time. Now that's both true humility *and* true greatness.

So, as we journey with Christ in the arenas of our family and community life, in our workplaces and in our church life, unless there is an element of both genuine humility and authentic pride, and of service and friendship—as well as some joy and dignity that emanates from all that—our time would be better spent doing something else.

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<sup>i</sup> As Frederick Buechner points out, there are basically two ways to exercise our religious belief and commitment. The first way is to do things for God that God needs to have done—carry messages for God, fight on God's side, feed God's hungry ones, serve God's purposes of justice, unity and healing—in short, moral, social and pastoral deeds. The second way to exercise our religion is to do things for God that we need to do—sing hymns to God, create beautiful things for God, give things up to be available for God, tell God what's on our minds and in our hearts, rest in God, rejoice in God—in short, spiritual deeds, or non-deeds, if you will. The trouble with doing either or both exercises of our religion is that, because they are seen to be from the will of God, we are often tempted to do them with a certain excess of pride. See Frederick Buechner, Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC (London: Collins, 1973), pp. 97-98.

<sup>ii</sup> An important element of our faith is the Biblical teaching about pride and humility. As Frederick Buechner put it,

“Pride is self-love, and in one sense [we] are encouraged to be proud; [for] another way of saying, Love your neighbor as yourself is to say, Love yourself as your neighbor. That doesn't mean that your pulse is supposed to quicken every time you look in the mirror, any more than it's supposed to quicken every time [you look and see] your neighbor.” Instead, it simply means “that the ability to work for your own good despite all the less than admirable things you know about yourself, is closely related to the ability to work for your neighbor's good despite all the less than admirable things you know about him [or her]” [Ibid., pp. 72-73].

However, Buechner continues, pointing out that this self-love or pride can become distorted when, instead of leading you to share with others the self you love, it leads you to keep yourself in perpetual safe deposit, as it were. And the problem with putting yourself in safe deposit, like putting anything else in a safe deposit, is that you do not accrue any interest that way. And, in fact, you become less and less interesting every day [Ibid].

<sup>iii</sup> Ibid., p. 40.

<sup>iv</sup> Ibid.

<sup>v</sup> The Jesus of modern TV evangelism and political campaigning, for example, is so trivialized or aggrandized, that the gospel often proclaimed becomes distorted and even oppressive.

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<sup>vi</sup> Recalling two images found in a number of Jesus' parables, we are called to be seeds or leaven, as it were, of God's healing, wholeness and justice in the world—as Jesus indicates in his parable of the seed grown secretly (Mark 4:26-29); the parable of the mustard seed (Matthew 13:31-32; Mark 4:30-32; Luke 13:18-19); the parable of the leaven (Matthew 13:33; Luke 13:20-21). Yes, we are to be leaven or yeast (or the mustard seed), but *not* the whole loaf, while also understanding that, as leaven or yeast, we need a lump, as it were, to go into—both an ecclesiastical lump as well as a wider worldly secular lump [Paraphrased from Ron Ferguson with Mark Chater, Mole Under the Fence: Conversations with Roland Walls (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 2006), p. 133.].

<sup>vii</sup> This has implications of how we conduct ourselves as a nation in the midst of all the other nations of the world. And at home, in this political season we've been asked whether it's just wealthy investors, or even those with salaries and wages, who are the creators of wealth and quality of life. And of course the answer is No; for we know that millions of other people work hard and help their neighbors, community, nation, and planet—often for miserably low wages or on voluntary bases—and who are often not seen as full contributors to society and certainly not as wealth creators, especially certain immigrant communities (legal or undocumented), as well as youth, stay-at-home parents, retirees, the physically or mentally challenged, or the disabled—but who, in fact, contribute generously to our social capital, the quality of life, to civil society, to the *commonwealth* (as we used to call it) – the common-wealth.