

This Gospel reading reminded me of my great-uncle Lawrence. He grew up on a homestead just outside Virginia City, Montana. He did quite well for himself and lived well into his '90s. Toward the end of his life, some people started treating him like a doddering old man. Now, it's true that he was a little slower in getting around, but some of his doctors and nurses, a store clerk or two, a few people at his church—they just stopped seeing just his basic human dignity. Even some of his family, including his daughter, Mary.

But from time to time, he found the opportunity to remind us all of just how sharp he really was. One day, we were piling into cars to go to some family event that I have long since forgotten. I was just sliding into the back seat of the car that dad was driving when Mary opened the opposite back door. With a gesture to my uncle, she said: "Age before beauty." My dear Uncle Lawrence didn't miss a beat. He slid across the seat to sit next to me, and with a wink and a smile, he said to Mary: "Pearls before swine!"

I think Jesus would have appreciated that story. Jesus often spoke out when he saw people making social status concerns a priority over human considerations. In this Gospel story, Luke's Jesus challenges socially motivated self-aggrandizement that comes at the expense of other people. This is, on one level, a story about table manners. A story about how we ought to treat others, especially those who are unable to pay us back. On a slightly deeper level, this is a story about being in right relationship with God and with each other. A story about pride and humility.

Now, let me be clear: When I say "pride," I'm not referring to the baseline confidence in one's self-worth—the *appropriate* sense of pride that must be returned or bolstered for people who have been denied basic human respect. I also don't mean the civic pride that prompts volunteers to work on behalf of their communities or even the harmless pride we develop for football teams or maybe even baseball teams, even if they do break our hearts every October.

No, I mean the kind of pride that denies or confuses the right relationships of creatures with their Creator; the kind of pride that is the engine of sin. *Sinful* pride is a serious spiritual malady because it separates us from God. Sinful pride makes our own will primary; puts our own desires in the place that rightfully belongs to God.

Luke's Jesus is a Sabbath guest of a leader of the Pharisees when he sees how the other guests are choosing places of honor; places that may rightfully belong to others. That prompts Jesus to tell a parable and to remind his Jewish host about the blessing that comes with inviting people who cannot repay him. According to the Pharisee's way of thinking, those who host people who have no way of repaying them will receive blessings at the resurrection.

The Pharisees, the spiritual grandmothers and grandfathers of modern Judaism, were expert and accurate interpreters of Jewish law. They were more like "blue-collar" Jews than the elitist Sadducees, who did not believe in resurrection. Jesus, who was raised in the Pharisee school of Judaism, may have had higher expectations for this particular host. A leader of the Pharisees should be *especially* thoughtful of the poor, the lame and the blind, and his guests should know to be more mindful of each other.

But then, just as it is today, synagogues and church communities are typical places for people, including clergy, to act out self-focused agendas. And that kind of self-focus that can easily slide into sinful pride.

A friend of mine with decades in the priesthood says that Mary's song of praise to God, Luke's Magnificat, offers a helpful insight into the roots of sinful pride<sup>1</sup>. In the Magnificat, Mary sings that God has "scattered the proud *in the imagination of their hearts*." There is the source. Sinful pride emerges from the imagination of the heart. Our heart's imagination can create illusions about ourselves that there is something about us and our personal agendas that makes us in some way more valuable, more important than others.

The world around us seeks and fosters this attitude. Look how we treat gifted athletes or unusually intelligent children or musical prodigies differently than other people as soon as we notice they are exceptional in some way. People born into positions of privilege who never encounter some kind of corrective are also at risk. In some rare situations, even a person who has had their *appropriate* self-respect driven out of them may create a false sense of self-importance that can engender sinful pride.

We can come to think that we are the *only* unique person, instead of the more amazing truth that we are *all* unique. The attraction of one's own self-importance can be a powerful draw leading to sinful pride, especially in a culture that feeds a false sense of self-importance to the imagination of our

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<sup>1</sup> This sermon owes a huge debt of gratitude to a sermon delivered by the Rev. Canon John Fergusson some years ago that left a perhaps obvious impression on my own thinking.

hearts. Whatever the cause, the result is a warped sense of one's place in the scheme of things. The nature of creation is that, first, God creates, maintains and loves all things. And second, creatures find their ultimate meaning only in God because everything created belongs to God. The beginning of my own sinful human pride is to forsake God by withdrawing my heart from its Maker. But if I can remember my place in the universe and my right relationship with God, I am better positioned to avoid or to recover from sinful pride.

Fortunately, our grandmothers and grandfathers in the faith left us a corrective based on scripture and on their own Christian spiritual practice through the ages. The preventive measure and the antidote to sinful pride is humility. Not humiliation, but groundedness, from the Latin *humilitas* meaning "on the ground." Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote this in a book titled "Ethics": "The surrender of the ego in selfless service must never be confused with the destruction and annihilation of this ego; for then indeed this ego would no longer be capable of assuming responsibility."

Humility involves experiences of God's grace, never condemnation. Humility involves getting into and staying in right relationship with God, because God is the truest and deepest desire of every human heart. Humility is the path to increasingly direct experiences of that desire. Benedictine author, Sr. Mary Margaret Funk says that "the fruit of humility is that, through self-forgetfulness, we abide in the presence of God<sup>2</sup>."

Jewish mystics say that we were created because God loves a story. Humility, as a practice of remembering our place in God's creation, teaches us to respond to God and to each other so that we are a God-story worth telling. Humility, as a practice of pursuing right relationship, can lead us to seek and treasure the human dignity inherent in every human life. Humility, as a practice of getting to know ourselves, is to be who God made us uniquely to be and to embody that truth without judging; without putting ourselves either above others or beneath them.

With enough practice, we may someday have the opportunity, like my great-uncle Lawrence, to remind someone with gentle good humor that even in our decline we are all "pearls."

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<sup>2</sup> Funk, Mary Margaret, OSB. *Tools Matter for Practicing the Spiritual Life*. New York: Continuum, 2001.