

“Pride and Humility: Umbrellas, Achievement, and Other Assorted Things”

- I. Introduction. Pride. Strong warnings about the sin of pride were delivered by the Hebrew prophets, by John the Baptist, and often by Jesus himself. The Scriptures warn us repeatedly that pride is both pervasive and insidious. We can become prideful about our possessions, what groups we belong to, our families, and our achievements. You name it – we can even become prideful about not having pride.

I had an interesting experience about pride two weeks ago while we were on vacation in South Carolina. It had to do with a rented beach umbrella. For this story to make sense, I'm going to have to tell you a little bit about my early days growing up on the Atlantic coast in New Jersey. I came from a working class family that lived on a very tight budget. Both of my parents had vivid memories of the depression that shaped their whole lives. During the summer we moved into the basement so that we could rent out our home for eight weeks to wealthy families who came to the shore from Philadelphia. Many of these families had rented umbrellas that had their names on them and were set up by an umbrella concession each day on the beach. The umbrellas were set up whether or not they went to the beach! My family went to the beach, but we never had a rented beach umbrella. As a child living by the ocean, I used to think that having your own rented umbrella on the beach would be a significant mark of success.

Two weeks ago, Peg and I were on the beach at Fripp Island sitting under a rented beach umbrella, and I was feeling strangely successful. The book I was reading as I sat under the umbrella was *The Challenge of Jesus* by N. T. Wright. Wright's book fascinated me. One of Wright's key points is that Jesus came with a mission to set up "A New Kingdom of God" – one based not upon worldly domination or material success, but a Kingdom based upon humility. This was not passive humility, but the kind of humility Jesus proposed in today's Gospel reading where it is better to go and sit in the place of lowest status. I looked up as I read and thought how easy it is to get caught up in the beach umbrellas in our life. When we get caught up in our pride, even in subtle ways, we begin to lose sight of God's call to radical Christian living and radical humility.

- II. Pride and humility: Part one – how pride works. In order to understand humility, we first need to be clear about pride. C. S. Lewis wrote in *Mere Christianity* that pride is the root of all sin. You see pride causes us to place ourselves in God's place, at the center of existence. Consequently we see the world rotating around us. We are at the center, and God is marginalized. Pride causes us to become more self-centered, sometimes in a greedy way, and to see others not fully as who they are, rather as who we judge them to be. This is because pride puffs us up, making us think that we are more important than we really are, and in a corresponding way, our pride deflates others. Pride and humility were what Jesus had in mind when he taught about the "great reversal." For example, Luke quotes Jesus as saying: "All who exalt themselves (pride) will be humbled and those who humble themselves (humility) will be exalted."
- IV. Pride and humility: Part two – how humility counteracts pride. Just as pride can get us into a jam, humility can help us get out. It's much easier to see what is true and what is real when we're not trying to keep ourselves puffed up. You see, the more preoccupied we are with ourselves, the less room there is for the Holy Spirit to work within and through us. Humility, in contrast, helps us to remember that no single one of us is the center of this drama we call life. It's not all about us. When we are more free of the burden of concentrating on our own needs, our own performance, and our own judgments, we become more free to be like Christ and to serve others.

When I first decided to go to seminary, I thought the primary benefit would be what I would learn about Scripture, theology, Anglican tradition, and the history of Christianity. It was true, these things did absolutely bowl me over. But I learned that as important as this new knowledge was, there was something even more important - - the lessons I had yet to learn about God and who I was in relationship to God. One such lesson is that an excessive and sometimes unrecognized focus on success and achievement can lead to pride and unhappiness. To be ready to become a priest I had to learn the lesson of humility. I began seminary having become accustomed to high academic achievement and success. When I arrived at Yale Divinity School, I become just one of a group of very bright students, some of whom had been studying philosophy, religion, Hebrew, and Greek for a long time. They were smart, and they knew a lot about things I knew nothing about! I was no longer on the top of the heap. It was very frustrating for me, and I can remember one weekend when Peg came up to New Haven, and I was literally ready to quit. In my opinion, seminary was not going well.

But you see, it was going well, very well indeed. I was learning a critical lesson: God had called me to become a priest, and God knew that I would not be ready to be a good priest until I learned to focus less on my own success and more on what God

was teaching me. I had been playing the success game and done well. But I couldn't learn the spiritual lessons I needed to learn if I went on with business as usual. I had to move into a place of humility as best I could and say to God "You're in charge. Teach me what I need to learn." That's what God did and is still doing with me.

- V. Conclusion. What is God doing with us? We can count on the fact that God works the same way with faith communities as God does with faithful people. I believe that God currently is teaching us certain lessons here at Ascension. First, God wants us to know that we as a parish community do not exist to please ourselves, but rather to worship God and to serve others in God's name. Our powerful connections with God in worship and service help us to remain humble. When we are truly worshipping God, we are reminded that we are absolutely dependent upon God's blessings to us. It is not a matter of what we do for God, instead it is about what God is doing for and through us. Every prayer we lift up, every song we sing, every sermon that's preached here should reflect that.

Secondly, I believe that we are being reminded, as Senior Warden Tom Ladd noted in his newsletter article this month, that as Christians we all still have much to learn. This coming Wednesday a new class on N. T. Wright's *Simply Christian* begins. I commend this class to you -- in fact I urge you to come. If we are humble we realize that not only are we responsible for teaching our children and young people, but that we ourselves still have much to learn about who God is. As learners, which is the true meaning of disciples, we become open to God's influence in our lives. And as we become more open, we are able to reflect upon and understand how the rented umbrellas in our lives can draw us away from understanding how much God has blessed us, has loved us, and wants deeply to be in communion with us. Amen.