

The Humility of Being Human

Ulysses S. Grant was the most important general of the Union Army during the Civil War. Yet even when he was Commander of the Armies in the West, he always dressed simply in the uniform of a private. After his victory at Vicksburg, he arrived in Washington to accept his appointment as General of All Military Forces. He sought a room at the famed Willard Hotel, because it was so centrally located to the White House. The reception clerk looked disdainfully at the shabby figure before him. “The only thing available,” the clerk said, “is a small room in the attic storage area.” Grant nodded and signed the registration book. The clerk happened to glance down at the signature and his face turned pale. Here was the most famous person in America and the hero of the hour. “Forgive me, sir,” he stammered. “The Willard is proud to offer you the finest suite.” Grant shook his head. “No, no. I’m sure the room you gave me will do very well.”

Like any human being, Ulysses S. Grant had his flaws, and yet by all accounts he was a man of sincere humility. He never jockeyed for position, nor did he ever seek to advance his career at the expense of someone else. He seems to have understood the teaching of Jesus that “those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”

In our gospel today, the most religious and respectable men in the Jewish community are literally jockeying for places at the head of the table. Each one wants more honor than the next. No one wants to defer to anyone else.

Taking notice of this situation, Jesus chooses a homely illustration to make the point about an eternal truth. If a quite undistinguished guest arrived at a feast and claimed the top place, and if a more distinguished guest, then arrived, and the man who had usurped the top place was told to step down, a most embarrassing situation would result. If, on the other hand, a man deliberately slipped into the bottom place and then was asked to occupy a more distinguished place, his humility would gain him even more honor. And so, Jesus warns: “For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.”

Real honor, says Jesus, comes not from self-serving choices but from what is bestowed on one by another. The Medal of Honor for our military and the

Medal of Freedom for civilians are the highest honors our country can grant to its citizens. No one actively pursues these honors. They are not rewards but recognition. They are not sought but bestowed.

Humility is that way. It is not status-seeking but gift-receiving. It insists that success is far less important than righteousness, and that status in the eyes of the world is frivolous compared to our status as children of God. It knows that privilege and power are far less fulfilling than integrity and decency. Humility is the way to live a happy life. More than that, it is the foundation for every other Christian virtue. Without humility, it is impossible to grow in the spiritual life.

There are two aspects to humility that are fundamental for every human being. First, humility means knowing our limitations.

We should never think we are better than other people. We're not. No matter, our family or wealth or educational background, no one has ever the right to look down on another person. In God's eyes, every human being is of infinite worth. Rich and poor alike: we are created in the image of God. Male and female alike: God redeems us. Black, brown, and white and every skin color alike: we are children of God.

We should never think of ourselves as too good for other people. We're not. St. Paul says we are sinners all – with no exceptions. We may sin differently, but we all sin, and therefore, we all need the same mercy and grace and forgiveness only God can provide.

The actor Denzel Washington was a year behind me at Fordham University. He was an ordinary guy then, but now he is a major figure in Hollywood. A few years ago he told a story to Fordham students about a time when he walked into his mother's house feeling full of himself, a movie star, worth millions. He said, "Mother, did you ever think this was all going to happen?" She responded, "Oh, please, go wash the windows for me. You have no idea how many people have been praying for you when you were a knucklehead."

Humility comes when we recognize that our success and achievements are the result of others who prayed, labored, and supported us throughout our lives. There are no self-made men or women. Others have helped us to

become who we are, to get where we are, and to be who we are. Life is a gift, all gift. When we accept that truth, humility flows naturally.

So first, humility means knowing our limitations.

The second aspect of humility is to see ourselves in perspective. Compared to other people, we are neither the best nor the worst. This is true in our jobs, in our family lives and in our prayer lives. Some people may think they are the greatest, but they deceive themselves. There is always someone better than us.

I will never forget a debate that took place among presidential hopefuls several years ago. After the debate, a reporter asked a Dartmouth College professor for her opinion of the candidates' performances. She didn't say a word about their positions on the issues or their skill at debate. She simply remarked, "None of them seems to have any humility."

What a telling trait about politicians! How many politicians have you noticed have humility?

Let me throw out some names for you: Alfred Landon, James Cox, John Davis, Charles Hughes, Alton Parker. Sound familiar? Probably not. Yet, every one of them was so important and well thought of, that at some point in the twentieth century each was a nominee for President of the United States. Millions voted for them, and for a while their names were plastered all over the place. But each one lost, and apart from Charles Evans Hughes who was appointed Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, all of them are now forgotten.

That's a good lesson for us: never think too much of yourself because there will come a time when no one will think of you at all. Our purpose on this earth is to serve others, improve the world, cherish our loved ones, seek spiritual growth and draw closer to God. We are not here to be the biggest and the best, but to be caring, loving, and decent human beings.

Occasionally, we do see people with a willingness to let go of privilege and power, and to take upon oneself the pain of the world.

Cardinal Paul-Emile Leger of Montreal, Canada was such a person. He was the most prominent churchman of the most prominent diocese in Canada

from 1950 to 1967. Roman Catholics in Quebec, who in the 1950s made up 95% of the population, adored him. Then, in 1967, Cardinal Leger announced that he was resigning his position to work as a priest in Cameroon, Africa among people with leprosy. He gave up the trappings of power to serve the lowest of the low in some obscure place in the world. In doing so, he showed all of us the face of Christ.

On a less dramatic note, back in 2004, the Archbishop of York, Dr. David Hope, announced that he was resigning his position to assume the role of a parish priest. Tired of all the endless rounds of administration and bureaucracy in the church, Archbishop Hope decided that he wanted to spend the rest of his life as a parish priest in pastoral care for people. Dr. Hope went from living in an archbishop's palace to a modest rectory. His salary was reduced from 60,000 pounds per year to 27,000 pounds. In commenting on his move, the *Guardian* of London said that his decision was "a model for many other grandees in public life."

Downward mobility – what a countercultural idea in a society that is obsessed with being number one! Only with a deep sense of humility are we able to go against the flow and expend our life in service rather than being served.

Tomorrow, we celebrate Labor Day when we give thanks for all those in our nation's workforce. It doesn't matter your work, whether you are a farm laborer or a bank president, a sanitation worker or a hedge fund manager, all honest work contributes to the common good of our country. No matter who we are or what station in life we enjoy, we should never think of ourselves as better than anyone else. We all have our God-given purpose in life, and together we build a better world.

During the dark days of World War II, England had a great deal of difficulty keeping workers in the coal mines. It was a thankless kind of job, lacking in any glory. Most chose to join the various military services. They desired something that could give them more social acceptance and recognition. Something was needed to motivate these workers so that they would remain in the mines.

Taking this into consideration, Winston Churchill addressed thousands of coal miners, emphasizing the significance of their contribution to the war effort. Churchill did this by painting for them a mental picture. He told them

to picture the grand parade that would take place when VE Day came. First, he said, would come the sailors of the British Navy, the ones who had upheld the grand tradition of Trafalgar and the defeat of the Armada. Next in the parade would come the Army, the ones who had stood tall at Dunkirk.

Last of all, he said, would come a long line of sweat- stained, soot-streaked men in miner's caps. And someone, he said, would cry from the crowd, "And where were you during the critical days of the struggle?" And then from ten thousand throats would come, "We were deep in the earth with our faces to the coal."

Churchill's speech reportedly moved several coal miners to tears. The leader instilled a sense of self-worth in them.

The truth is: greatness doesn't come from status, privilege and power. It comes from humble acts of service that result in a deep sense of joy and satisfaction. If you want to be great, then be humble. It's a paradox, but true. In all that we think and in all that we do, in how we see ourselves and in how we see others, may we heed the admonition of Jesus, "For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."

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