

“A Difficult Task” ~ Luke 14:1, 7-14 8-29-10

Whenever I encounter this morning’s reading from the gospel of Luke, I hear an old Country Western song play over and over in my mind. We all know the song I am thinking of, the one that sings:

*O Lord, it's hard to be humble
 When you're perfect in every way.
 I can't wait to look in the mirror
 Cause I get better looking each day.
 To know me is to love me
 I must be a heck of a man
 Oh Lord, it's hard to be humble
 But I'm doing the best that I can.*

Admit it now, we all know at least one person who probably sings this

song to him or her self every day as she or he gazes in the mirror. On occasion we might even be him or her before we take a second look in the mirror and realize that we’re not all that. People who sing this song to themselves and to the lucky others around them, are the ones who think they should be seated in the places of honor, right up there at the head of the table. Sometime this embarrasses those accompanying such a person and we might find ourselves saying, as one friend did to a restaurant hostess, “You have to forgive him, he doesn’t know that we don’t know who he thinks he is.”

Jesus was reminding folks to understand who they were and just what their position in life was. He often told those who would and could hear that the first will be last and the last first.

This can be very difficult for some to grasp. We have been raised in a culture that prizes self-esteem and that is a good thing, in most cases. To accomplish anything in this life, we need to believe that we are worthy people who have unique sets of gifts and talents. Be glad that a surgeon has the faith in him or herself to take a scalpel and make a cut that can be life-saving. Cherish a medical researcher who believes that he or she will discover the cure for cancer. Admire a businessman or woman who can lead people back into economic strength after a period of dark times. Recognize a teacher who has the knack to interest and inspire his or her students. Having faith in oneself can help us accomplish great things, having overbearing pride is a far different thing.

Jesus cautions those who think too highly of themselves. He warns that they might be embarrassed when their host tells them that there is someone else who should be in the place of honor and that they need to take a lower seat.

There are many people who have a difficult time when they are told to take a place of honor at a head table or up on a stage. Many prefer to work behind the scenes and support those who need the spotlight. We enjoy good, hard work that produces good results without needing any accolades for what it is we have accomplished. Many find that their sweetest rewards are in knowing that they have contributed to something good and a quiet thank you is more than sufficient. We are all grateful for those who give up parts of their lives to serve others with no expectation of anything in return. We appreciate those who do things because they simply love to do them and not for any self-serving motives. Our service is not to be for ourselves but for the greater good. Our service, as Christians, is to be in the service of God.

Sometimes, we truly believe that what we are doing is for the good of everyone and we plunge ahead without making any plans for the consequences of our actions. We believe we have the right answers—"damn the torpedoes, full speed ahead." This is not always true. As Congregationalists we should know and understand that the more people involved in coming to a consensus over a plan of action, the better. We are not a people of small committees doing work behind closed doors and then presenting our work as a done deal to others. Often our way takes a little more time and a lot more patience, but it helps us to realize that there is more than one voice doing the work of bringing about God's kingdom here on earth. It is a project that requires broad support it is to be sustained and produce good and wholesome fruit. It cannot be the work of one person or of a few. As that old saw reminds us, "There is no 'i' in team." Everyone has a viewpoint they should be allowed to express instead of being intimidated by loud voices that insist that they have the only and best idea or way. Voices of the ones who feel they must be on center stage and seated in the places of honor. Often these folks run into a wall or see their projects fold up beneath them.

So, as difficult a task as it may be, it is wise for us to know our place in life. It is wise for us to remember that as bright as we are, there is always someone more so. It is wise to remember that as good-looking as that face in the mirror might be, there is always someone more handsome or prettier. It is a wise thing to remember that we are not more perfect than God. We all have our flaws and it is best that we take the time to honestly see what they are. They will prove humbling for each of us. Amen