

**Twenty-Second Sunday after Pentecost
October 28, 2007**

By
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PRAISE, ABUNDANCE, AND HUMILITY! These words capture the essence of today's lessons. While we might connect the first two words in our minds as being related, since praise could be a result of having received an abundance of something, it might be a stretch to connect humility with praise and abundance. Yet if we were to write all three words on a piece of paper in a horizontal line and read each of the lessons and the Psalm again carefully, a pattern of flow from one to the other and back again emerges. Actually, even if those words are not in a horizontal line, but placed randomly on the paper, the flow would still be there.

The Old Testament lesson from Joel is full of images: early and late rains; threshing floors full of grain; vats overflowing with wine and oil! There is also a promise of abundance following a long period of time, which was full of destruction for the people of Israel. A time of harvest had arrived for the Israelites. They were to receive an abundance of gifts from the Lord- freedom from locusts, which destroyed the crops, the gift of the Spirit, which was poured out upon all of the people, even the slaves. There is the promise of forgiveness for past wrongs and redemption on the Day of Judgment for those who turned back to the Lord.

Psalm 65-Te decet hymnus (Your tenth hymn of praise), is certainly full of praise, but it also tells us a story using what I would describe as "power words" to capture our hearts and imaginations. The themes of praise, forgiveness of sins, satisfaction, salvation, power, might and majesty are all included. Verses 8-14 tell us that God provides for us with abundance! He doesn't do things halfway! The river of God is full of water; the furrows are drenched and smoothed out. The ground is softened with heavy rain. We surely can relate to the rain and water images. After a bone dry summer where it seemed as if everything was going to die for lack of water, we have been blessed, and abundantly so, with fall rains which have left even the earthworms scrambling to find higher ground as the aquifers recharge a bit. As the rains wash, refresh, and renew the earth, so are we washed and renewed.

We learn through these lessons that God is with us through the highs and the lows, the good times and the bad, the drought times and the abundant times. We sometimes forget to pray in thanksgiving when things are going well, and tend to pray more when things are not going so well. But pray we can and should do. In prayer we approach God, we can have a conversation with him, and in so doing, humble ourselves in acknowledgement that there is something greater than ourselves.

HUMILITY is the third element on the flow chart and it is humility and prayer, which are addressed in Luke's Gospel. We find two men going up to the temple to pray. Initially we might think that this is no big deal, but let's take a closer look. The parable in this Gospel is addressed to "some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt." Several weeks ago I spoke about Jesus' disdain for certain groups of people he interacted with during his life, specifically the Pharisees and lawyers. In the parable we read today, Jesus' words have a wider application and set up a comparison between the spiritual pride of the Pharisee and the humility of the tax collector. The Pharisee was a person of elite status, education, and respectability who knew and meticulously followed Mosaic Law. He would have been a model citizen of the community.

At the opposite end of the social spectrum was the tax collector. In first century Palestine, the responsibility of collecting Roman taxes was often contracted out to both Gentile and Jewish agents who could charge any tax rate they wished as long as the government got its due share. Tax collectors could and did become quite wealthy while taking advantage of others. Many devout Jews regarded the paying of any tax to a foreign power as treason against God, so any person, and

especially any Jewish person engaged in this enterprise was considered a traitor. A tax collector was counted among the worst of sinners and was banned from Jewish social and religious life-including attendance at the temple.

Jesus tells us that both men went to the temple to pray. The Pharisee is quite full of himself and even though he is there to pray, his prayer is one of thanksgiving that he is not in the same circumstances as others. He appears to feel that he is superior to known sinners such as the tax collector. He surely is not humble, not accepting of his faults or sins. In contrast, the tax collector is completely aware of who he is and what he is about. He prays "God, be merciful to me, a sinner." His actions demonstrate a sense of humility before God. He stands far from the altar, keeps his face lowered, beats his breast, and begs for mercy. He returns home made right before God because he recognizes that he is a sinner in need of God's grace and forgiveness.

When I read this parable, the thing, which struck me, the most was that humility was an important and valuable attribute- but why? Merriam Webster defines humility as the quality or state of being humble. The definitions of humble are: not proud or haughty, not pretentious, unassuming, insignificant. The synonyms for humble are meek, modest and lowly. These definitions and synonyms may cause us to reflect upon how Jesus arrived in this world. He did not arrive as a king, but as a child, born in a manger- about as lowly as one could get. Yet he grew up watching, learning, waiting, and eventually preaching about his world and his Father's world as well. Justice, peace, and equality were always at the heart of his messages to the people. It wasn't easy for Jesus to get his message across, nor was it easy for his disciples, as evidenced by Paul's second letter to Timothy where Paul knows that he will die soon, yet encourages Timothy to be a good soldier, to learn to endure suffering, and to keep preaching God's message, even if it is not the popular thing to do. Paul knows he will die for his faith, but he will be rewarded for his faithfulness.

What then is the Good News for us in these lessons? I think it may have to do with finding a balance in our daily lives; the balance between our work lives, our family lives, and our spiritual lives; the cycle of life within the circle of life. It may be about letting go of things, which tie us down so that we can explore new possibilities to become connected with our fellow human beings and with God. Through it all, we have God's promise that we are never alone. In our communal worship we can praise God from whom all blessings flow (through his abundant love and grace), we can approach God in humility as creatures who live below His heavenly kingdom, and we can praise Him above the heavenly hosts- Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.

Amen.