

Sermon: C Proper 17 2016
St. Augustine's-in-the-Woods
28 August 2016
The Rev. Susan S. Gaumer

Sirach 10:12-18
Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16
Luke 14: 1, 7-14
Psalm 112

The Book of Sirach or Ecclesiasticus is in the Apocrypha--the between Testaments writings that we use in the Episcopal Church. Sometimes it is hard to find them. Today's readings have a sort of theme stated in Sirach: "The beginning of human pride is to forsake the Lord; the heart has withdrawn from its Maker." These words of wisdom about human nature date from centuries before Jesus.

Pride has been around for a long time. When we put ourselves first, before God and all other people, the results are often unfortunate, even tragic. We can get so full of ourselves--who we are, what we accomplish, so enamored of power or social status we practically explode from that deadliest of all seven sins--the sin of Pride.

All of which makes what Jesus has to say in today's Gospel seem almost trivial. Who sits where at a dinner party? Really? Well, it did matter in Jesus' day, perhaps more than today, but I suppose getting invited to sit at the head table still has an attraction in some circumstances. The thought of everyone invited to the Pharisee's supper scrambling for the lowest seats in order to be invited up to the highest has a certain comic quality to me. We wouldn't do that, would we? Race each other for the lowest places so as to appear to be the most humble? Do we really care that much about what other people think of us? Well, being emotionally vulnerable human beings, often we do. We also know how easily we can put our own agenda ahead of everything else.

I was pondering all this when I remembered an interesting day in my life as the Ecumenical/Interfaith Officer for the Diocese of Louisiana. A large interfaith service was scheduled on a weekday morning at St. Louis Roman Catholic Cathedral in the French Quarter. Parking down there is always a nightmare so I arranged for my secretary to drop me off on the corner of Chartres Street [pronounced Charter in New Orleans] close to the Cathedral entrance on Jackson Square. I planned to take the streetcar back Uptown later. Others in the service began to be dropped off in the same place. Greeting each other, we hung out chatting, eyeing the corner.

When a local Roman Catholic priest pulled up in his ancient Pontiac, out hopped the Archbishop who was hosting the event. That was a surprise; he usually had a driver from his palatial Residence at the seminary. We greeted him, wondering where the good Father would park. The next vehicle was a black limousine--must be some visiting dignitary, I thought. But who should step out of it but the Episcopal bishop, my bishop! "That sure makes a statement!" crossed my mind. I wondered what my ecumenical and interfaith colleagues were thinking. Until then I didn't know my bishop went around in a limo.

Following the service several of us were on the same corner. As I turned to head for the streetcar a rabbi, whose synagogue was close to my church, called out "Susan, do you want to share a cab?" "Sure!" Just then the limousine appeared at the corner and my bishop went over to the driver and then turned to us and said "Why don't you two go back Uptown in the limo? The Archbishop has invited me to have lunch at his Residence." Up to the head table, so to speak! "The driver will pick me up there later today." We got in. On the way Uptown, the good rabbi said "If I spot any of my parishioners before they see me in this thing I'm going to duck!" I replied: "If any of mine see me, I'm going to wave!"--revealing that riding in that limo was an issue for each of us! Somehow a degree of humility seems expected of the ordained.

What was Jesus getting at and what am I trying to get at in talking about such human foibles as positioning oneself for social advancement or riding in a limo? What on earth do these things have to do with God? Well, Jesus knew, and we do too, that underneath our ego-driven desires for attention and proving our self-worth by being one-up on our neighbor lurks a deeper craving to believe that "I" am the center of the universe, not anyone else or even God. It's really all about me.

In an age when humility is in very short supply, this should come as no surprise to any of us. The sin of pride is as prevalent today as in Jesus' time and it is THE major obstacle to loving God and loving our neighbors. Are people more likely to give in to pride than in Jesus day? I don't know, but it does seem that we are surrounded by a multitude of temptations to assert our own importance over the value of others and to forget all about God in the process. And we, as people of this nation and of the world, are suffering because of a loss of accountability to anything other than our own desires. In the words of Sirach "the heart has withdrawn from its Maker."

We can pass all this off by saying that human nature has always been this way and is unlikely to change any time soon, but that is not where both Jesus and the Letter to the Hebrews lead us. Paying attention to what we have heard:

We can choose to be more compassionate to other people, especially those who are poorer or whose lives are more complicated than ours are. We can invite them over for coffee or even to dinner.

We can choose to be faithful in our relationships.

We can choose to be content with what we have and choose not to want more and more.

We can choose to be less guarded and more open with our feelings, letting others into our hearts and the challenges of our own lives.

We can choose to take a more humble path, following Jesus' example.

The limo turned out to be a short-lived indulgence. Hurricane Katrina came along, the most humbling experience most of us in New Orleans had ever experienced. After it, choosing a simpler life made sense and our attention turned not just to rebuilding our own lives, but more especially to the needs of the homeless who roamed our streets. We turned away from ourselves toward challenging new ministries with the poor, and in so doing, our lives changed. In some wonderful way our hearts returned to our Maker.

Every day of our lives, we can choose a humbler, simpler way of living. So, let's do it.