

MEALS WITH JESUS: Humility

Luke 11:37-54

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WATCH/LISTEN: www.fbcjc.org/sermon/meals-with-jesus-humility/

There is a hilarious Saturday Night Live sketch from 2015 called “A Thanksgiving Meal.” In the sketch, the extended family gathers around the table to celebrate Thanksgiving. Everyone is enjoying their meal, passing the potatoes, sharing what they’re thankful for, and then someone brings up politics. Words start flying, tempers flare, and the vegetables aren’t the only thing steamed. Until a little girl walks over to the radio and plays the song “Hello” by Adele. Upon hearing those first few melodic notes, everyone is magically transformed by the lyrics and melody into a people of peace and love. Then, the song stops, and the light-hearted conversation continues until someone mentions who they’re voting for, and chairs are pushed back, fingers pointing, insults hurling. Until the little girl plays the song again, and all is well around the table. This happens at least once more, and then, at the end of the sketch, the little girl looks at the camera and says with a smile, “Thanks, Adele.” Adele has saved the family Thanksgiving.

Maybe you can relate to tense dinner gatherings among family and friends. Perhaps the tough conversation is out of the blue. Maybe an off-handed comment by an uncle sets off the cousin. Perhaps the tension has been building for a while, but the conversation needs to happen, and the meal is the time to serve it up. Maybe you should have Adele cued and ready to save your gathering this Thanksgiving.

Some meals can be uncomfortable, and the conversation difficult to swallow. This is the case for today’s meal with Jesus and a Pharisee.

Tensions had been building between Jesus and some religious leaders as Jesus made his way to Jerusalem, announcing the kingdom of God. In chapter 5 of Luke’s Gospel, we learn that Jesus and his disciples did not fast or pray according to the laws observed by the Pharisees. In chapter 6, we learn Jesus and the disciples were not strictly observant when it came to working on the Sabbath. Jesus heals people quite often on the Sabbath, violating the law. In chapter 7, Jesus touches the coffin of a dead boy, which clearly violates the laws of clean and unclean. And in today’s story, Jesus slacks, most likely intentionally, by not ritually washing his hands.¹

Before you say, “Eww, gross, Jesus,” we’re not talking about washing your hands with soap and water before a meal like your mamma taught you. Jesus neglected to pour some water over his hands as a ritual gesture. And the Pharisee who invited him to dinner took note. Verse 38 says, “The Pharisee was amazed to see that he did not first wash before dinner.” And not amazed in a good way.

The Pharisees were concerned about faithfully setting apart the people of God, and that happened through strict observance of the laws and rituals. Yet again, they were astonished that Jesus did not observe the customary Jewish rituals. However, Jesus used this occasion to confront some Pharisees' legalism, judgmental spirit, and arrogance.

The scripture doesn't tell us when the meal took a turn, but somewhere between the appetizer and the dessert, Jesus served up the "woes" or warnings to the religious leaders. He warned them against hypocrisy and their obsession with external appearances. Jesus spoke of their unhealthy desire for recognition and honor in public places while neglecting justice, love, and mercy. He stressed that genuine humility involves sincere acts of love, compassion, and service to others without seeking praise or special treatment. Jesus criticized the oppression of people through religious rules and regulations rather than guiding them in the ways of God. Jesus urged the Pharisees to embrace humility, learn from their mistakes, and lead with compassion and grace.

Luke knows that power, pride, and prestige always tempt. Always. And they destroy what God wishes to create. They destroy community as people are used and abused for some to feel better about or protect themselves. They cheapen worship and devotion as people put on a show and separate belief from action. These attitudes segregate people into groups with falsely assigned value and worth.

Luke also knows that humility, integrity, service, and unity are the features of the kingdom of God. These are the ways of Jesus and should be the standard ways of God's people. Humility, integrity, service, and unity help make God's ways visible in the world.

The Pharisees' content was not the problem. Jesus said in Matthew 5:17, "Do not think that I have come to abolish Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them." The problem is not really the content. The problem is their conduct. They either fail to practice what they teach, add to the law, and burden the people, or they've forgotten to interpret the law with an eye to God's larger vision of justice, mercy, and love. How often do we encounter teachers, preachers, and Christians who champion correct doctrine in hateful, demeaning ways? True teaching does not abuse other people.

I was in Oklahoma this week with three Missions Leadership Team members: Ron, Marlene Medin, and Mike Schroer. We met with folks from Together for Hope, Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, and two local indigenous pastors located west of Oklahoma City. Our church has been involved with the Lakota and Dakota in South Dakota for nearly 14 years, learning a great deal about the systemic and persistent poverty on reservations and among indigenous communities across the US. Those South Dakota partnerships ended, but we are committed to continued engagement and partnerships with native communities. So, this trip was to visit potential opportunities among these communities in Oklahoma. It was a fruitful and educational trip.

Before this trip, the four of us knew very little about the history of the 39 tribes located (and many relocated) in Oklahoma. In every conversation, we admitted our ignorance from the beginning. It's better to do that ourselves before we make it abundantly clear accidentally, right? We reminded ourselves each step of the way that we come with humility because it is easy to forget we might not have all the answers or solutions. These pastors know their communities and needs better than we ever could. They know their communities' history, culture, and attitudes. We don't. They are the best ones to minister to their people and determine their needs and our ministry goals. We aren't. We are coming in humility to partner together in communities of extreme poverty, side-by-side, equal to equal, for the glory of God, not our own. This is the way of Jesus. Humility is one of the values of our Mission Leadership Team and I believe this congregation.

But we and the larger church have not always gotten this right. Sometimes painfully so. On the last day of the trip, we toured the First Americans Museum in Oklahoma City, where visitors experience the collective histories of 39 distinctive First American Nations living in Oklahoma today. As you walk the gallery, the beauty and pain of these nations are chronicled in powerful, interactive exhibits. I was moved to tears by the section focused on the long history of intentional policies of assimilation, removal, and the elimination of Native peoples. This happened through massacres, disease, forced relocation, boarding schools, cultural assimilation, punitive laws, broken treaties, and more. Many white Americans believed Native peoples were not only capable of radically changing their cultures and lifestyles but that they would even prefer white Christian culture over their own. Christians were at the heart of many of these assimilation policies, taking children away from families, cutting their hair, altering their dress, changing their names, and forbidding their language, customs, and religion. With incredible arrogance, Americans worked to export our culture and ways among the few remaining Indians. In 1888, John Oberly, Commissioner of Indian Affairs, wrote, "The Indian must be imbued with the exalting egotism of American civilization so that he will say "I" instead of "We," and "This is mine," instead of "This is ours." What a value to export.

Brigadier General Richard Pratt, founder of the Carlisle Indian Industrial Boarding School believed that to claim their rightful place as American citizens, Native Americans needed to renounce their tribal way of life, convert to Christianity, abandon their reservations, and seek education and employment among the "best classes" of Americans. In his writings, he described his belief that the government must "kill the Indian...to save the man."

I pray today, we can recognize the arrogance, power, pride, and prestige that led these Christians to separate God's justice, love, and mercy from the oppressive burdens they placed upon the First Americans. If Jesus shared a meal with Brigadier Pratt and others, he would have some woes for them to hear. If Jesus shared a meal with us today, he might also have some woes for us. When we visited with one local Native pastor on the trip, he told us about a church in town that was having an event for children in the community. So, the pastor of the native church went to him, asking about bringing their children, and the pastor told him that the native children were not welcome, saying, "Why would we want your kind at our church?" Friends, this was a year and a half ago.

Woe to us.

The Apostle Paul, a former Pharisee of all Pharisees, who once belonged and ascribed to the strictest school of teaching in the time of Jesus, having encountered Jesus and being transformed by him, wrote the following, "If I speak in the tongues of humans and of angels but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers and understand all mysteries and all knowledge and if I have all faith so as to remove mountains but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions and if I hand over my body so that I may boast but do not have love, I gain nothing. Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable; it keeps no record of wrongs; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things." I Corinthians 13:1-7

Perhaps Jesus's dinner with the Pharisee was on Paul's mind as he penned those words. Maybe he remembered how he had spoken authoritative words, preached the law, understood mysteries, had faith that could move mountains, gave away his possessions, and was even willing to die and kill for his faith, **but he did not have love**. And thus, it was all noise, just loud, nauseating, offensive noise to God, and Paul repented of it. Paul meticulously kept the outside of his cup clean, but the inside was utter filth until Jesus transformed his life and heart. Then, his cup was cleaned from the inside out.

True humility begins with a heart transformed by the love and grace of God through Christ Jesus. It is not merely about outward displays or devotion to traditions or religious rules but about allowing God to change us from the inside out. Humility requires letting go of pride and the desire for recognition or praise. It involves living authentically and sincerely, humbly loving and serving others.

Nik Wallenda is an American follower of Christ who has become the world's most-watched high-wire artist and daredevil. A billion people across the world saw his two most recent feats. In 2012, Wallenda walked a tightrope across Niagara Falls. In 2013, Wallenda became the first to high-wire walk across the Grand Canyon.

Nik knows he will be tempted by pride, so after the huge crowds and the media fade away, he engages in a simple spiritual discipline: he walks where the crowds have just stood and quietly picks up trash. Wallenda wrote,

"My purpose is simply to help clean up after myself. The huge crowd left a great deal of trash behind, and I feel compelled to pitch in. Besides, after the inordinate amount of attention I sought and received, I need to keep myself grounded. Three hours of cleaning up debris is good for my soul. Humility does not come naturally to me. So, if I have to force myself into situations that are humbling, so be it I know that I need to get down on my hands and knees like everyone else. I do it because it's a way to keep from tripping. As a follower of Jesus, I see him

washing the feet of others. I do it because if I don't serve others, I'll be serving nothing but my ego."ⁱⁱ

Nik picking up trash may seem so small compared to the hurt experienced by our First Nations friends or the pain in our world today. It may seem like small things don't really matter, but each is an act of defiance against arrogance, power, pride, and prestige taking root in our souls. Humility doesn't come naturally to us. We must intentionally seek and practice it so we do not serve our ego. Author C.S. Lewis wrote, "Good and evil both increase at compound interest. That is why the little decisions you and I make every day are of such infinite importance. The smallest good act today is the capture of a strategic point from which, a few months later, you may be able to go on to victories you never dreamed of. An apparently trivial indulgence in lust or anger today is the loss of a ridge or railway line or bridgehead from which the enemy may launch an attack otherwise impossible."

So, we pick up the trash. Return the cart. Admit we're wrong. Seek to learn. Humility, integrity, service, and unity are the features of the kingdom of God. These are the ways of Jesus and should be the standard ways of God's people. At the final meal with his disciples, Jesus did not wash his hands. He washed the feet of the disciples and said to them and us, "I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you." (John 13:15)

Friends, we don't need "Hello" by Adele to save Thanksgiving or remind us how to act around the tables in life. We need each other, and we need Jesus. We need to remember Who we belong to, who we give our allegiance to. We need to pick up the trash whether we created it and tear down walls whether we built them. We need to wash feet, serving others in love as Jesus taught us. Each time we do these things, we are playing the song we and the world desperately need to hear: the song of humility, integrity, service, and unity, the song of Jesus.

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All scripture quoted is from the NRSVUE unless otherwise noted.

ⁱMichael Card. *Luke: The Gospel of Amazement*, 151.

ⁱⁱNik Wallenda with David Ritz, *Balance* (Faith Words, 2013), page 207