

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Hebrew 13:1-8, 15-16, Psalm 81, Luke 14:1, 7-14
August 28, 2106
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A very learned university professor was looking for the meaning of life. After several years of searching, he was told of a wise hermit who lived deep in the woods. When he found the hermit's shack, he was invited in. The old man offered the professor a cup of tea. As he poured it, the cup became full to the top and then began overflowing. The professor thought the hermit might be a bit senile and shouted, "Stop! Stop! It's full! No more can go in."

"Exactly the point!" said the hermit. "Like this cup, you are full of your own opinions, perceptions and ideas. How can you possibly learn anything new until you first begin to empty your mind?"

Most people think they know pretty much everything by the age of 12. Our great challenge as we age is to grow by unlearning things.

A fundamental Christian virtue is humility, which is very hard to realize because it requires a good deal of unlearning. It is the theme of today's gospel as Jesus speaks about always taking the lower place: "For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."

Bishop Fulton Sheen once said, "Humility for the Christian is like underwear. You should always wear it, but never let it show."

True humility is to be proud of God. For the faithful, anything that we might be tempted to be proud of we should consider gifts from God in the first place. We fulfill our purpose on earth when we put to use the special skills and abilities God has given us on behalf of others.

Jesus says that we are to do things for people who cannot repay us in any way. We are to invest in people and projects that have no visible return benefit for us.

Last Sunday we were watching a Great Courses lecture in Sunday school about a man named Father Damien. He was a Catholic priest from Belgium who was sent to serve Roman Catholics in the Hawaiian Islands in 1864, well before Hawaii became a state.

On the Hawaiian island of Molokai, a leper colony had been established. Father Damien was supposed to be one of four priests that would visit the island in rotation to hold services and provide spiritual care. He was the first to go and after six months there, he told his bishop that he wanted to stay indefinitely. He built a church, vastly improved the living conditions, and changed the lepers' bandages regularly.

When he preached, he referred to himself as a leper as well because he knew he was sick with sin and in need of God's grace like everyone else. He was much beloved in the colony of about 1,000 people.

After being there over 10 years, he contracted leprosy himself and died a few years later. He was 49 years old. His reputation among Hawaiians was so revered that when Hawaii became a state in 1960 and was able to have two statues placed in the Capitol building in Washington D.C., Father Damien was selected to be one of them.

Another example of selfless service and great humility comes from a story told about Booker T. Washington. He was born a slave and educated in Virginia before becoming a highly respected educator and spokesperson for black people around the turn of the 20th century. He would become first president of the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama.

One day while he was walking through a wealthy, white neighborhood in Alabama, a woman asked him if he would like to earn a few dollars chopping wood for her. Professor Washington certainly didn't need the money, but not having any other pressing business at that moment he agreed to help her. He rolled up his sleeves and proceeded to cut, split and carry the wood into her house. He did far more than he was asked to do.

After he left the woman's house, a neighbor recognized him and told the woman who he was. The next day she went to his office at Tuskegee and apologized profusely. "It's perfectly all right, Madam," he said. "Occasionally I enjoy a little manual labor. Besides," he continued, "it's always a delight to do something for a new friend."

The woman shook his hand warmly. His meek and gracious attitude so endeared him to the woman that she persuaded some very wealthy acquaintances to join her in donating thousands of dollars to the Tuskegee Institute.

There are some things we can do to practice humility. One is to laugh at ourselves and not take ourselves too seriously.

Probably my most memorable "foot in mouth moment" was the occasion I went to Missouri to meet Juanita's family for the first time. The first night there, we were having dinner with her brothers and their families around her mother's dinner table. Her brothers were avid golfers, and we were going to play the following day. I launched into my two pet peeves about golf. The first was how everyone now rode in a cart instead of walking. The second was why I didn't think it was necessary and appropriate to drink beer during play.

After I finished, there was a noticeable silence, and a few around the table had little grins on their faces. It turned out that Juanita's younger brother was an excellent golfer, but he always rode in a cart so he could bring along a small cooler of beer.

I didn't make the best first expression and was quite embarrassed. Fortunately, Juanita's family was able to find my comments most humorous, and I was welcomed into the family in spite of them.

A long time ago, I read that parents could help their children accept mistakes and be humble by sharing all the foolish things each one said or did that day each night around the dinner table.

Another strategy for increasing humility is to continue to pursue an activity that you aren't good at and are unlikely to ever get good at. For me that is surfing.

Growing flowers encourages humility because there is nothing we can do that can compare with the beauty of a single flower.

The last way we want to learn humility is by suffering deep humiliation. The Olympic swimmer, Ryan Lochte, has recently become the unfortunate poster boy for that approach.

I told a few clergy friends the other day that as I faced retirement I think I will go from being a somebody to being a nobody. That may sound a bit depressing, but in fact, I am looking forward to the challenge and the change. I can still be proud of God and use my God-given gifts in new and far less visible ways. I am sure Jesus will approve wholeheartedly.

Finally, someone has said, "If we are filled with God, we will be generous with things." So, be filled with God, and there will also be less room to be filled with ourselves. AMEN.