

Conley Memorial Presbyterian Church, 15<sup>th</sup> Sunday After Pentecost, August 28, 2016

## **Be Careful With Your Ego**

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Luke 14:1, 7-14

Here we are in the midst of an election campaign. Candidate after candidate from those seeking local offices to candidates for governor and the legislature to those running for Congress or the Presidency are telling you how great they are. Listening to them one would think that they are more powerful than God. "I will fix this! I will solve the country's problems! I will get rid of the national debt!" On and on it goes.

We all know that they can't accomplish what they are promising to do, certainly not single handedly, yet they go on and on promising the impossible. Some of them actually believe what they are promising. They lack humility and sadly some voters believe them.

A strong candidate knows his or her limitations but admitting those limitations rarely gets them elected. They have to show off their ego, discard their humility and, as the song goes, "dream the impossible dream." Sadly we know that what they claim is smoke and mirrors. The world doesn't work that way --- not at all.

I wonder how elections would work if candidates admitted that they were fallible human beings who can't perform miracles but who would just do their best? Wouldn't that be refreshing? Just imagine --- humble politicians – it sounds like an oxymoron doesn't it?

Our scripture reading this morning from Luke's gospel would be a good lesson for our politicians to follow as would the earlier lessons in Luke.

Jesus tells his disciples to "*carry no purse, no bag, no sandals; shake the dust off of your feet ... beware of all covetousness; sell your possessions and give alms*"<sup>(1)</sup> ... and so on. These are not manifestations of ego --- they are signs of humbleness.

Our reading from Luke is a parable about being humble. James Brashler<sup>(2)</sup> reminds us that "*Jesus was aware that it is human nature to want to be respected. People generally strive to attain honor and avoid shame. Honor is an indication of respect while shame incurs disgrace. Jesus noticed that people who considered*

*themselves to be honorable wanted to have the most prominent place near the host at a dinner party.”*

But how do you achieve prominence? You have to earn it --- you can't just barge in and claim it. That is what many politicians try to do.

In our parable, Jesus is instructing us to be humble. Don't claim the best for ourselves --- claim the least --- in this case the seat at the table which is furthest from the host.

If you claim the highest seat, the greatest position of honor, you are likely to have a rude awakening when you are asked to move down. If you claim the lowest seat and truly deserve greater recognition, you will be asked to move up.

*“In a very counter-cultural teaching, Jesus instructs his hearers to show humility by not claiming the best seats ... Humility was not a desirable trait in the culture of Jesus' day.*

*“The opposite of humility --- self-assertion and high estimates of one's personal importance --- characterizes those who were desirous of honor and social prominence. Jesus bluntly warns, ‘All who exalt themselves will be humbled and those who humble themselves will be exalted.’” (2)*

People cultivate status and expect reciprocity. Jesus tells us not to live in this way. He tells us instead to serve the blind, the poor, the crippled, those in need --- the outcasts of society --- those who are in no position to repay you. Abandon self-interest and you will receive your reward in heaven.

But in your humility, be careful that you don't disguise ego with faux humility.

*“The human ego is quite clever and, upon hearing that taking a low seat may not only avoid embarrassment but lead to elevation to the head table, may convert the instruction about humility into a new strategy for self-elevation ... taking the low seat because one is humble is one thing; taking the low seat as a way to move up is another. This entire message becomes a cartoon if there is a mad, competitive rush for the lowest place, with ears cocked toward the host, waiting for the call to ascend ...*

*“The radicality of the text should not be missed. Both the synagogue and the church are constitutionally committed to the care of the poor and the disabled. Some courses of action are not options, and this is one of them. Here, however, Jesus is not calling on Christians to provide for the needs of the poor and the disabled; he says to*

*invite them to dinner ... Hospitality, then, is not having each other over on Friday evenings but welcoming those who are in no position to host us in return.”*<sup>(3)</sup>

William Barclay summarizes this message quite well. *“A Man may give because he cannot help it. That is the only real way to give. The law of the kingdom is this --- that if a man gives to gain reward he will receive no reward; but if a man gives no thought of reward, his reward is certain. The only real giving is that which is the uncontrollable outflow of love.”*<sup>(4)</sup>

Is this the motivation of our politicians? In some cases, yes, but I fear that it is not for most of them.

They seek power and prestige. They are not humble, not at all. They seek influence and cater to the wealthy, not to those who are truly needy.

There are exceptions of course like Jimmy Carter who devotes his life to those who are less fortunate. He builds housing for the needy in this country and abroad. He is a true Christian but he was not highly regarded as a politician because he didn't seek the highest seat at the table. He sought only to do, and is doing, God's will.

Imagine how much better this world would be if all politicians everywhere emulated him.

As William Barclay<sup>(4)</sup> said, *“God gave because he so loved the world --- and so must we.”*

Amen.

(1) Fred B. Craddock, et al, Preaching Through the Christian Year, Year C, Trinity Press International, Valley Forge, PA, 1994.

(2) James Brashler in *Presbyterian Outlook*, January 6, 2014.

(3) Fred B. Craddock, Interpretation: Luke, John Knox Press, Louisville, 1990.

(4) William Barclay, *The Gospel of Luke*, rev. ed., The Westminster Press, Philadelphia, 1975.