

Personal Confession

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Luke 14:1, 7-14

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Growing up in Texas, I was exposed at an early age to my share of pickup truck theology. In most cases you might think that has to do with the medium and message and theology that truck bumpers and mud flaps and gun racks and truck windows often become, but in my case it was the pickup truck theology that came inside the truck through the truck tape deck. If you are under forty years old, by the way, a tape deck was this hole in the middle of a vehicle radio console that played plastic tapes with music on them, first 8 tracks then cassette tapes and later the everything got thinner and held CDs and now there is no hole at all anymore, just a Bluetooth or wireless connection. But the pickup truck theology that I was exposed to mainly came through the voice of Willie Nelson, but occasionally Merle Haggard, Johnny Lee, Johnny Paycheck, Dolly Parton, Emmylou Harris, and Linda Ronstadt. By the way, spoiler alert, but we will be hearing a piece of Dolly Parton's music later in worship today, too. One of the songs of that era was written and performed by Mac Davis and later by Willie Nelson and in a way, you could call the song a sarcastic or a conceited prayer to God. I am going to spare you from singing it, but it begins like this: 'O Lord, it's hard to be humble, when you're perfect in every way.' It gets worse, here is the next line: 'I can't wait to look in the mirror, cause I get better lookin' each day.' We have gotten so good at trying to be humble, not just by listening to country music from the 1980s, but as characterized by the recently coined phrase the 'humble brag,' or through a more technical definition called virtue signaling, which is when the 'subtext of an action contains as an action of our own virtuousness.' There are many things in life and in the Christian life in particular, that become more elusive the more fixated we become in attaining them, and humility is certainly one of them. To illustrate this, I have a minister mentor who always liked to say, 'I can out-humble anyone in this room,' proving how hard a life a humility is and also how easily we like to take certain virtues and try to turn them into things we try to win or we wreck them by turning them into some kind of personal achievement. Humility, generosity, patience, forbearance, these are not things we can implement a plan and immediately produce more successful results. These are virtues that become a part of us while we are busy trying to follow Jesus Christ and caught up in lives of faith, hope, and love. While we are caught up in the life of God and the life God has called us to live, such virtues find their way end without our willing ourselves to instill them in ourselves. We don't become humble by trying to become humble, we learn humility by trying to follow Jesus Christ.

Which brings us to this passage from Luke that frankly I don't like. For starters, it's just too hard, and second it goes against the grain of a lot of my instincts and ambitions for pursuing personal achievement. Jesus telling us that we should aim to sit at the least worthy spot at the table and that those who exalt themselves will be humbled and those who humble themselves will be exalted and that we should welcome to our tables not just dear friends or people like us or relatives and neighbors but that the poor, the impaired, the hurting, the downtrodden should be welcomed and made to feel that they belong at our tables and in our lives. We all walk on egg shells or probably worry too much over political polarization and the consequences right now, but I remember awhile back David Brooks pointing out that political turmoil and anger and hyper-partisanship are simply a symptom of the real epidemic in our country right now, which is a social blindness or lack of belonging that so many feel. So the anger at the Supreme Court or January 6th or the anger of Salvador Ramos (he was the shooter in Uvalde Texas), may have more to do with a fractured sense of belonging, purpose, and care of souls or lack thereof than winning any political arguments and issues.

Mark Twain is attributed the quotation that the two most important days in our lives are the day that we are born and the day we find out why. If I could 'humbly' alter that quotation just a little, I would say that there may be more than just one 'why' as why we are here, but it is hard to get a sense of the 'why' in our lives if we are just trying to survive or if we have not been made to feel that we belong or if we reduce our lives to our own personal advancement and think anyone else's lives or problems or belongings have nothing to do it all with us. What if nobody ever helped us understand, learn, or see the important gifts of our lives, the 'why' we are here. I feel like I am subliminally making the argument that all our problems could be solved by a return to the pickup truck theology of the 1980s, but indulge with one more observation taken from Luckenbach, Texas, made famous by Waylon Jennings song by the same name. The dance hall and crossroads town out in the middle of nowhere in the Texas hill country has a sign that hangs on the wall and has now been marketed on t-shirts, aprons, mugs, and shot glasses, but the sign says, 'Everybody is somebody in Luckenbach, Texas.' And people from everywhere USA and beyond trek there maybe for the novelty but also I wonder if their pilgrimages are not a sign of what we all long for and what Jesus graciously depicts for us in this passage: a community where all find their 'why' and where everybody is somebody.

Which brings me back to a personal confession which is simply that what Christ asks of us often goes against some of our own instincts and ambitions for ourselves. I don't know about you, but I would rather be exalted than humbled. Borrowing from Will Willimon, 'tell me I have some charismatic flair for leadership. Praise me for the art of my preaching or the empathy of my pastoral care, urge me to become a spiritual virtuoso, but please do not yoke me to [Christ's] body, do not force me to find what I do and

therefore who I am among those who gather at my so very mundane congregation.’ He continues, hitting more close to home: ‘give me a degree and tell me I am special, allow me to have some exotic spiritual knowledge that makes me holy,’ but don’t make me let go of all that, or forfeit it even. I don’t want to learn that becoming a follower of Jesus Christ and sharing in the life of Christian community is not the same thing as becoming a spiritual virtuoso and religious overachiever. I don’t think Jesus is encouraging us to become spiritual underachievers here, but is instead pointing us toward a life beyond our achievements and our superficial hopes for self-exaltation.

In a recent piece in the *Presbyterian Outlook*, Bob Dunham highlighted a recent news segment about a ‘million-dollar bequest from the estate of an Austrian man to a town in France.’ The person who made the bequest was a Jew who died at the age of 90 and who as a boy came to the French town of Le Chambon. The people of this small town in France were profiled many years ago in Philip Hallie’s book *Lest Innoncent Blood Be Shed* when he tried to understand what would lead villagers in a small town in France to risk their lives to save Jewish strangers fleeing the Nazis. According to Dunham, ‘Hallie found that much of their education had come from the teachings of the village church where the gospel proclaimed and embodied in life together help them to see what God might be asking of them in a time of crisis. So ‘when Nazis came to town looking for Jews, the people of Le Chambon quietly did what was right, sheltering their Jewish siblings from evil.’ One woman faked a heart attack when the Nazis showed up on her doorstep. Other families made room in their barns or basements or other back houses and it has been estimated that the people of the community saved between 3000 and 5000 Jews from capture and death.¹ The 90 year old Austrian man who died recently was one of these thousands whose life was saved and he was thanking that town for welcoming him and sheltering him and in the face of danger saying to him that he belonged and that his life mattered.

Who were these larger than life villagers who acted heroically and graciously? They were ordinary farmers and townspeople who had more than a speaking acquaintance with the ways of a Savior who said things like ‘When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.’ Dunham reminds us that one of the perpetrators of this extravagant hospitality, a woman

¹ Robert E. Dunham, ‘For What Else Were We Born?’ *Presbyterian Outlook* (May 3, 2021), 37.

who lived in the village and worshipped at the village church, was asked why she would risk her life of the sake of total strangers. Her response: 'For what else was I born.'²

There is no trophy in Christianity we are chasing here. No linear self-improvement plan that we can easily measure. And most of us will probably not be confronted with the larger than life occasion to shelter lives from Nazi pursuers. But in gathering us together in the weekly rhythm of worship, Jesus has a way of helping us to walk humbly and to face the 'why' of our birth in the particular moments of our own lives, as he invites us in our own time and place to help another human being find belonging in this world. And perhaps we both will also find, miraculously, not only that our lives are intertwined and the 'why' of our own birth, but we also find that both of us are exalted, not by ourselves, but through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

² Robert E. Dunham, 'For What Else Were We Born?' Presbyterian Outlook (May 3, 2021), 37.