

“Those Who Humble Themselves Will Be Exalted”

Sermon by Pastor John Bengston

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With the start of the football season upon us, again the phrases of competition ring in our ears. Wasn't it Vince Lombardi who said, “Nice guys finish last.” Then there is the statement, “It's not whether you win or lose; it's how you play the game,” upon which others have said, “That must have been said by a loser.” The mantra of athletic competition, especially on the gridiron, cries out, “There is nothing else but winning.”

Such themes are not reserved for athletic competition alone. Remember the movie of 20 years ago titled “Wall Street” in which the lead man, Michael Douglas, gave a speech at a stockholders meeting saying, “Greed is good.” The character he played then went on to give a speech touting the complimentary qualities of greed touting how greed drives people to achieve.

And Jesus said, “All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.” What a disconnect with much of what we hear. The Gospel proclamation of Christ Jesus announces a far different message than the way of the world.

What is humbleness? A man observed a woman in the grocery store with a three year old girl in her basket. As they passed the cookie section, the child asked for cookies and her mother told her “No.” The little girl immediately began to whine and fuss. The mother said quietly, “Now, Ellen, we just have a few more aisles to go; don't be upset. It won't be long. The man passed the mother again a few aisles

over in the candy section. Of course, the little girl began to shout for candy. When she couldn't have any, she began to cry. The mother said, "There, there, Ellen, don't cry. Only two more aisles to go, and then we'll be checking out." Later, the man happened to be behind the pair at the checkout stand, where the little girl immediately began to clamor for gum and burst into a terrible tantrum upon discovering there would be no gum purchased today. The mother patiently said, "Ellen, we'll be through this check out in five minutes, and then you can go home and have a nice nap." The man decided to compliment the mother. "I couldn't help noticing how patient you were with little Ellen." "Ellen?" said the mother, "I'm Ellen. My little girl's name is Tammy!"

A rather lighthearted illustration of humbleness, unless of course you were Ellen.

In the High Priestly Prayer of Jesus, recorded in the 17th chapter of John, Jesus prays that his followers – including me and you – be "in the world but not of the world" (John 17:11, 14). How is that possible?

How realistic is it in this intensely competitive world to be humble? Or as Jesus said in the Beatitudes, "Blessed are the meek" (Matthew 5:5), and note that he said "meek," not "weak." Humbleness, meekness, "go sit down at the lowest place" (Luke 14:10). Occasions such as wedding receptions where seating is assigned raise the issue of status and run the risk of embarrassment and insult. Seating at State banquets must be carefully planned so that no one is offended by being placed in a position that may possibly offend. The infection of relative status causes illness among us as well as among those attending the meal recorded in Luke 14.

Where do we learn what a humble life looks like? Certainly by reading the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Where else?

Last May 29, The Denver Post (Section B, page 6) carried a major article on the retirement of Skeet Johnson. Written by Howard Pankratz, the article was a

celebration of the 23 years Mr. Johnson served in the Colorado State Public Defender's Office. He grew up in the projects of Chicago, went from parochial schools in Chicago to Redlands University in California where he was president of the Black Students Union. He found his way to Tennessee to become the executive director of the Tennessee Commission for Human Development, and then in his early 30's to the University of Denver School of Law. In a class taught by Larry Pozner, Skeet Johnson was influenced to apply his law school education as a public defender.

Howard Pankratz wrote of Skeet Johnson, "Much of who Johnson is revolves around his religious beliefs, his work in other countries with (his local Roman Catholic) Church...and his faith..." In a phone conversation with Mr. Pankratz, he emphasized to me the very strong faith commitment that motivates Mr. Johnson daily.

The concluding paragraph of the article quotes Skeet Johnson saying, "I am totally, completely blessed, and I know where those blessings come from It isn't because of anything I've done. It is because of the grace of God." Humbleness.

Immediately upon retirement, Mr. Johnson was going to Uganda to help Catholics who are ministering to the people of that war-torn country. Upon his return, he had already committed to be a guardian ad litem – an advocate appointed by the court to look out for the best interests of children during legal proceedings.

When I read this article, I felt that I was reading a description of humbleness as defined by Jesus. Here is a person who is indeed meek –meaning humble, strong, and forgiving, one who recognizes his dependence upon the Lord God Almighty.

With his education, fine mind, and opportunities, he could have chosen many other avenues of endeavor. Let me quickly say, I am not suggesting that all attorneys be Public Defenders, for lawyers are needed by all kinds of people in many life

situations. But Skeet Johnson is one who embodied the words of Jesus, “Do not exalt yourself, go and sit down at the lowest place” (Luke 14:10). What a witness. What an example!

The challenge to me and you is to remember that when we sing “Children of the Heavenly Father” we are singing about a Heavenly Father who sees all humans as his children. Interesting to note the context for today’s Gospel reading. These are not words spoken in a vacuum. They were delivered to a gathering of very religious people, God’s Chosen People. They knew the Scriptures and taught the Scriptures. But their hearts still retained the ways of the world: rank and status. Jesus “noticed how the guests chose the places of honor” (Luke 14:7). If and when we stop seeing ourselves as belonging to the Lord, we lose perspective and begin to embrace the gridiron garbage that “Nice guys finish last,” and the movie mush that “greed is good.”

The Lord’s Prayer does begin, “Our Father.” That’s a very big “our” for all God’s children are included. It’s when we stop seeing others as children of the Heavenly Father, when we separate ourselves, that we become disconnected not only from the Lord God, but also from ourselves and others. The humbleness in today’s reading is not a human virtue; please hear me, it’s not something we decide we can conjure up within ourselves. It is, as Skeet Johnson said quoted in the Denver Post article, “the grace of God.” A gift.

The overwhelming love of God in Christ Jesus humbles us, for we understand that God reaches out to us no matter whom or where we are. It is God who first seeks us, embraces us, and showers us with forgiveness and compassion.

That is so different than the way of the world that rewards successful, strong, healthy, aggressive, and victorious people. Living in the presence of the risen Christ and receiving the touch of his mercy and grace is all we need to be humble – and grateful. Being humble is not a description of character but a definition of

**relationship – a relationship with the Savior and Lord who calls and claims us.
Amen.**