

30th Sunday in Ordinary Time - C

Humility is considered a virtue. In fact, it's one of the virtues that are painted on the upper walls of St. Ben's.

But I'm not sure if we really think that positively about humility. If we talk about someone being "a really humble person," that's generally taken to be a compliment, but to aspire to being a humble person can easily go against the grain.

Part of that comes from the American culture. We Americans value individuality and what makes us different. We talk about "exceptionalism" and think it confers specialness and worth.

Our common humanity can become merely the backdrop for where the real action is: us making a difference.

This conventional way of valuing ourselves is deeply etched in our consciousness.

So much so, that it can swamp any thinking we might have about humility, and the fact that we are part of a larger reality with all its faults and failings, its goodness and dignity.

As close as we can come sometimes is to be able to acknowledge in our head that humility is a good thing, but it never seems to trickle down into the place where the rubber hits the road, the place where decisions are made.

We spend more energy talking ourselves out of the idea that we are no better than the rest of humanity and into the idea that the problem with people lies out there, and doesn't include us.

Psychologists would call that a form of denial. It can even crop up in our personal piety.

Maybe you heard the story about the priest and the deacon who were in church praying.

The priest prayed, "Lord, have mercy on me a sinner."

The deacon then prayed, "Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner."

In the back of church the janitor was also praying. He prayed, "Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner."

The priest looked toward the back of the church over his shoulder, and said to the deacon, "Look who thinks he's a sinner."

You may recall that one of the first things Pope Francis said when appeared on the balcony at St. Peter's after being elected was to admit that he was a sinner.

Someone might conclude that "he had to say that. That's the pious thing to say."

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But as I see him operate, I can't believe that it was just a pious platitude.

His humility is too real for mere piety. The way he seeks out the poor, the lowly, the forgotten, even the shunned shows that he has a profound sense of his connection with them on the personal level.

Rather than praying, "Thank you, God for not making me like other people," he seems more inclined to pray, "Thank you, God, for making me one of the many people you love and want to save."

Humility moves toward its perfection when we take seriously that we are all in the same boat. Each and every one of us, regardless of the gifts we have been given and even regardless of the extent to which we have made use of them, stands in the need of the saving power of God.

If we can make that the basis for everything else that comes along, we open ourselves to grace, which is poured out into us freely, only hindered by the extent to which we are prepared to receive it.

The nature of God is to pour grace into any vessel empty enough to receive it.

When we finally are humble enough to come into consciousness of who we really are, God can really be for us who God truly is.