

Goldmines for Growth: Yearning for Status
Luke 3:15-22; Mark 10:35-45
January 10, 2010

I was disappointed, but not surprised, to read last week that clergy honesty ratings have hit a 32-year low. In 2009 50 percent of Americans surveyed rated ministers' moral caliber as high or very high, according to Gallup's annual Honesty and Ethics Ratings of Professions. That is down 6% from the previous year. The most highly regarded profession was nursing, with 83 percent judging nurses' honesty and ethics as high or very high. Police officers gained 7 points with 63 percent ranking their honesty and ethics as high or very high.¹

Our competitive society has a penchant for rankings and standings. Where we stand on the ladder of measurement is important. The drive to feel superior resides deep in human nature. Human beings persistently jockey for status, position, and power every day. Think of how easily annoyed we become if someone tries to push in front of us in line: "I was here first!" Think of how important we feel if we find ourselves even loosely connected to a famous person, to be able to say, for instance, "I ate at the same restaurant as Meryl Streep!"

Human beings tend to organize societies on the basis of status, power, and privilege. We see this in the story of James and John, the sons of Zebedee. They have the gall to say to Jesus, "We want you to do for us whatever we ask of you. What we want is the privilege of sitting in the seats of honor at your right and left in your kingdom." What a bold and audacious attempt at one-upmanship! It even falls in the category of conceit and narcissism.

This is a perfect example of the human condition. We strive to garner a place as high as possible on the social ladder to secure our status and position. We covet the best of the lot, the top spot, the place of recognition. Even pastors are tempted to climb the corporate ladder, secretly attracted to the large church in a growing area with a nice, comfortable salary.

Jesus doesn't necessarily destroy the impulse to gain a greater status, but rather he calls it to a process of conversion. He calls those who possess status and rank to use their power in service to God's purposes in the world.

James and John may not know what they are requesting. They likely envision sitting in places of honor and privilege in which they are served by others. Jesus turns this idea on its head. His business associates will be the ones who get down on their knees to wash the feet of others. The ministry in which he is engaged is one of service.

At the last Passover meal Jesus shares with his disciples, he uses the cup to symbolize the "blood of the covenant, poured out for many." It is symbolic of his suffering for others. Likewise is the reference to baptism, which John the Baptist

proclaims is a baptism of repentance, of change, of transformation. Baptism is not simply a stamp of approval on the status quo. It is a mighty act of turning away from that which is against God and a turning toward that which is of God. Our baptismal liturgy speaks of participating in the death and resurrection of Christ, a dying to an old way of life and rising to a godly way of life. The way of life that Jesus models and teaches is a life of service.

For most of his life Albert Einstein had the portraits of two scientists, Newton and Maxwell, hanging on this wall as role models to inspire him. Toward the end of his life, however, he took them down and replaced them with portraits of Albert Schweitzer and Mahatma Gandhi. He needed new role models, he said—not of success, but of humble service.ⁱⁱ

Jesus suggests that what needs to be done in the world take priority over who gets credit for doing it. We are to shift the focus of our awareness from the doer to the deed. Jesus' teaching has roots in the Hebrew prophets who envisioned a culture of reciprocity in which "the least" are helped by "the greatest." The prophets proclaimed that everyone is called to orient life around the service of God, who envisions the abundant life for all.ⁱⁱⁱ When the priority and focus is investment in the fabric of society, in the development of healthy people, everyone wins. Instead of seeking power over others, the greater goal is to empower others to succeed.

Jesus' vision goes beyond social pragmatism to a conversion of the heart, a reorientation of the soul around a new center: the active, loving grace of God that wants to move through us for the sake of the world. This does not mean that we give away all our possessions, power, and status. The call is to surrender everything we are and have into "a joint bank account with God," as if we imagine God and the prophets cosigning every check we write. What a powerful image to ponder: all that we have and are in a joint bank account with God. Every action would be cause for reflection: would God co-sign on this action with me? If we ignore our duty to "the least of these," would God co-sign on our negligence? If we use our status to effect healthy change in poverty-stricken communities, would the prophets of God co-sign on our activity? Living our lives as a joint venture partnership with God is an awesome privilege and a mighty responsibility.

"The promise of the gospel is that in the sacrifice of the self for others, not only will a higher and better self emerge, but the reign of God will continue to unfold."^{iv} As we use our gifts and talents in serving our neighbor, we find our own lives enhanced.

In his memoirs, Elie Wiesel claims that he and his father motivated each other to survive the World War II concentration camps. Wiesel was motivated to stay alive to take care of his elderly father. He knew that if he died, his father would give up hope and die also.

Wiesel wrote, “The Germans tried to get the inmates to think only of themselves, to forget relatives and friends, to tend only to their own needs. But what happened was just the reverse. Those who retreated to a universe limited to their own bodies had less chance of getting out alive, while to live for a brother, a friend, an ideal, helped you hold out longer.”

In spending our lives in the service of God and neighbor, not only does a higher self emerge, but the reign of God draws closer to earth.

Today we offer an opportunity to renew our baptismal covenant. The sacrament of baptism is an act in which we take on the mantle of Christ. By the presence of the Holy Spirit, we are clothed in the qualities of Christ, such as compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience (Colossians 3:12). Most of us spend a lifetime living into the wardrobe designed by Christ. Life continually presents challenges and opportunities for us to grow and deepen those qualities.

The seal of baptism is not simply a mark of honor and status as a member of the family of God. When we are immersed in the waters of baptism, we die to an old way of life and rise again to a new way of life, a Christ-like way of life. We claim our status as disciples of Jesus in order to participate in his ministry, to use our gifts in the service of our neighbor.

St Francis penned it so beautifully in his prayer:

*O Divine Master, grant that I may not seek so much
To be consoled as to console,
To be understood as to understand,
To be loved as to love,
For it is in giving that we receive,
It is in pardoning that we are pardoned,
And it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.*

At one time Marian Anderson was asked to name the greatest moment in her life. There were many great moments from which to choose. The night Toscanini told her that hers was the finest voice of the century. The private concert she gave at the White House for the Roosevelts and the king and queen of England. The \$10,000 Bok Award she received as the person who had done the most for her hometown of Philadelphia. There was the Easter Sunday in Washington when she stood beneath the Lincoln statue and sang for a crowd of 75,000, including Cabinet members, Supreme Court justices, and members of Congress. Which of these great moments did she choose?

None of them. Marian Anderson said that the greatest moment of her life was the day she went home and told her widowed mother she wouldn't have to take in washing anymore.^v

When we feel ourselves drawn to greater status, privilege or power, let us add it to our joint account with God, spending our gifts, resources, talents, and

power in ways that make God delighted to be a partner in our lives. For true greatness is found in the service of one another.

ⁱ Religious News Service, *The Christian Century*, January 12, 2010, p. 13.

ⁱⁱ Philip Yancey, "Humility's Many Faces," *Christianity Today*, December 4, 2000.

ⁱⁱⁱ Robert Corin Morris, *Wrestling with Grace: A Spirituality for the Rough Edges of Daily Life* (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 2003), pp. 153-155.

^{iv} James J. Thompson, *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary*, Year B, Vol. 4, David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, editors (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), p. 192.

^v Alan Loy McGinnis, *The Friendship Factor* (Augsburg Press, 1979), p. 30.

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