

Our Old Testament wisdom writer introduced our theme for today with the words: “My child, conduct your affairs with humility...” (Sirach 3,17)

One of my favorite stories on humility is about one of our former presidents (I can't remember which one). He decided to visit a nursing home and as he was going from one person to another, one patient seemed unimpressed that he was talking to the president. So he asked the patient, “Sir, do you know who I am?” The patient answered, “No, but if you ask the nurse at the desk she'll be able to tell you.”

Humility is a most misunderstood virtue. Most people equate it with thinking of themselves as worthless. In our modern day society, when we are told if we don't value ourselves, no one else will, humility is not a virtue most of us care to cultivate. We would prefer to leave that virtue to the people in monasteries. Well, I'm here to tell you that demeaning ourselves is not a virtue and it's not humility.

I think the best way of understanding humility is to think of the Latin word from which it comes. It comes from “humus” which means “earth.” For me the best definition of humility is someone who has their feet on the ground, someone who knows who they are and where they stand in relation to God and the rest of creation. There was a time when human beings thought our planet was the center of the universe and everything else in space revolved around us. We're a lot more humble now in that regard, because we have a better concept of our place in this universe. Whether we're any more humble in other ways is questionable. I'm sure we all know people who still think the universe revolves around them. The point I'm making is that humility is grounded in reality. And a person who is truly in touch with reality is a great person. Once a visiting diplomat was trying to be very humble when talking to Golda Meir, the Prime Minister of Israel. She brought him back down to earth with the comment: “Don't be so humble – you're not that great.”

In today's gospel Jesus' instruction to the guests coming to a formal banquet to take the lowest place is part of the reason people have a misconception about humility. I don't think it's an example of humility at all. It could even be a bit of satire, in that I think it's a lesson to a bunch of proud people on how they can get themselves elevated in the eyes of others. Go to the dinner and take the last place and someone will invite you to a more prominent place, Jesus said. Indeed, the lesson is a lesson on good manners, but Jesus is just tapping into their pride to

encourage them to use better manners. Jesus' observation about the guests taking the best places at dinner could well apply to so many people's efforts today to get ahead of the next guy. If our neighbor or co-worker has a big car, we have to have a bigger one, if they have designer clothes, we have to have better ones. We live in a competitive world. Now there is nothing wrong with trying to be our best. But when we don't have time for prayer, when we don't have time for the people we love, when we don't have time to care of ourselves in a proper way, because we're too busy trying to get ahead, that's more than just trying to be our best. That's inordinate pride, inordinate because our life is out of balance.

On the other hand, the habit of putting ourselves down which many people have (and which I did to myself for many years) is also a form of pride. It's a neurotic form of pride that condemns us for not being supermen or superwomen. We're all human and none of us are as perfect as we would like ourselves to be. A healthy form of pride helps us accept ourselves and try to do better. Neurotic pride condemns us for what we are not or cannot be. Healthy pride and humility are very close to one another. It's possible they are two sides of the same coin. Humility is being grounded, having our feet on the ground, knowing where we stand in relation to God and the rest of creation. And knowing this and then trying to be the best we can be is simply trying to make the best use of the gifts God gave us in the first place.

I think there is a much better description of humility in the second part of today's gospel when Jesus tells us not to do favors just for people who can repay us, but to do things for those who can't. Invite the poor to your dinner parties. This shows you're not trying to gain material favors and that you see even the poor and lowly are loved by God as you are.

We saw good examples of pride and humility this past week at the Olympics. People who thought they were the best, were humbled and others who did their best ended up being exalted. A good example of a person who taught us humility was Elizabeth Kubler Ross, the author of the book *On Death and Dying*. She herself died this past week. She taught us how to care for one of the most neglected segments of society and that was dying people. Due to the discomfort people had with death, she found that most people dying in hospitals or institutions felt abandoned. Doctors and nurses would shy away from them and family members were afraid to talk with the dying person about death. Her book paved the way for the hospice system in the United States. She herself was a triplet and was often indistinguishable from her two sisters. She said this experience helped her understand people who felt they had no identity of their own. It wasn't just the

neglected terminally ill she empathized with. As a psychologist she worked with blind, retarded, multi-handicapped children. She said “they were numbers in institutions. I swear I knew every child, their individuality and their inner beauty. I looked for it, and I found it.” I think this illustrates that there are many ways to respond to Jesus’ words: “When you hold a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind.”

I want to say as I conclude, you are all humble people here today! I say this in all sincerity because it takes humility to come to Mass. When you come to Mass you are showing that you are aware that you depend on the Lord, you can’t do it all yourself. And you are showing that you know you owe him big time. You’re here to acknowledge that debt and to say thanks. In this you are in touch with reality. You are properly grounded and you are humble.

23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time— C Cycle September 5, 2004

INTRODUCTION: When we think of slavery we think of the brutal situation of African slaves as it existed in our own country up until the middle of the 19th century. In the Roman Empire 20 centuries ago, where slavery was common, it was somewhat different. Slaves came from nations and peoples that Rome had conquered. There were probably more white slaves than blacks. They may have worked on the land but many were educated or skilled in some profession and would have worked as musicians, scribes, craftsmen, teachers and even doctors. Slaves could be set free by their masters for good service or a slave could sometimes save up enough money to buy his or her own freedom. Today’s second reading is about a slave, Onesimus. He ran away from his master Philemon, thus the reading is from a letter of St. Paul to Philemon. By law Onesimus could have been put to death for trying to escape. In fear for his life he ran to St. Paul, who was in prison at the time, probably in Ephesus. In those days prisoners were just locked up and they were not given three square meals a day or gymnasiums to work out in or cable TV’s to entertain them. Unless a prisoner had someone to bring them food and take care of their needs, they probably would have starved to death. So, while Onesimus was with Paul, he took care of him and in the process Paul converted him to Christ. Paul thus sees himself as his spiritual father and refers to Onesimus as his own child. Paul felt an obligation to send him back to Philemon, who was also one of Paul’s converts. He didn’t feel right benefiting from a gift that had not been given to him. Paul asked Philemon to receive Onesimus back, not as a piece of property, but as a brother in the Lord. Christianity transcends all other relationships as we hear in today’s gospel.

HOMILY: Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem. St. Luke tells us he was traveling with great crowds. Jesus was going to be murdered, and he was totally aware of what he was going to have to face. We know from other parts of the gospels that the people, and not even his own disciples, knew what was ahead. Their expectations were different than his. They were looking for some major changes in their lives. They expected Jesus would raise a resistance against the Roman occupation, drive the Roman army out of Israel and take control of their land once again. He would be their messiah and savior. And on top of all this, Jesus had unusual powers: he could heal the sick, feed the hungry, even raise the dead. He would be an awesome king! He was going to suffer. They were full of hope and expectation of getting their nation back and enjoying a good life. He turned around and stopped them. He told them you can't follow me unless you hate your father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters and even your own life. You'll have to pick up your own cross if you want to be my disciple. He told them with two simple parables they have to stop and think if they were prepared to do this. Like a man building a tower or a king going into battle, are they sure they have what it takes?

One wonders if the great crowds that were following him faded away after all that. The one word in today's gospel that is really shocking is the word "hate." Certainly we know Jesus doesn't want us to hate anyone. Jesus even provided for his own mother while he was dying on the cross as he entrusted her to the care of his beloved disciple. So how could Jesus tell us to "hate" anyone, especially those closest to us? The only record we have of what Jesus said is in the Greek text of the gospels. The Greek uses the verb "miseo" which means "hate." It is from that word that we get the English word: misanthrope. Miseo, however, has a secondary meaning which is "to prefer or favor something or someone less." And of course this is what Jesus means. St. Matthew, in a parallel passage in his gospel, quotes Jesus in this sense: "Whoever loves his father or mother, brother or sister, more than me is not worthy of me." All Jesus wants us to really hate is sin. But Jesus is still very demanding in that he is telling us if we are going to follow him, he must take priority over everyone and everything in our lives, and even over our own life. Many people have physically lost even their lives rather than to turn away from Christ. We call them martyrs, not the kind of people who are suicide bombers who want to kill, but martyrs in the sense of witnesses, witnesses to Jesus and to his law of love. We must be willing to lose everything rather than lose Jesus, or we are not his disciple.

Politicians today are busy telling us how they'll make life wonderful for everyone. Jesus would not make a good politician. He tells us it will not always be easy if we go with him. As I have seen over and over again, life is even harder if we try to live our lives without him. For those who have not made the commitment of putting Christ first in their lives, Jesus' saying sounds harsh. But those who have put Christ first know what peace that can bring. Those who are willing to lose everything, are really gaining everything, for in Jesus is the fullness of life, the fullness of all that is good.

Too many Christians think of their faith like some kind of insurance. As long as they pay their premiums they're protected. And they try to figure out what is the minimum they can get by with to still be covered. If the rules say go to Mass every Sunday, they figure well maybe once or twice a month will work just as well. If the rules say love your neighbor, well maybe I'll still be covered if I don't hurt anyone even if I do not do anything to help anyone. I'm sure you can think of other examples. The story of the tower half built tells us Jesus wants more than half-hearted efforts. Heaven will not be "pie in the sky." Heaven will be the happiness of giving ourselves in love to the greatest lover in the universe. Our readings today are asking us: are we willing to truly give our life over to Christ in order to know the fullness of life?

24th Sunday in Ordinary Time— C Cycle September 12, 2004

INTRODUCTION: Our first reading takes us back to the time of Moses, about 1300 years before Christ. The people of Israel were simply a bunch of slaves who had just escaped from Egypt through God's power and Moses' leadership. God had just made them his people at Mt. Sinai through a covenant in which they pledged to honor Yahweh as their only God. God then called Moses to the top of Mt. Sinai to speak further with him. With their leader out of sight, the people got into trouble. Probably following the customs of the Egyptians, they tried to represent their God in animal form and they fashioned for themselves a golden calf. This is where our first reading begins. God is angry with his people. Notice, in speaking to Moses, he calls them "your people." Moses becomes an intercessor for the people and "convinces" God to be forgiving. His prayer displays total unselfishness. God, of course, wanted to grant forgiveness in the first place. In the second reading we hear St. Paul describe what a sinful person he once was and how God was merciful to him. Jesus gives us three beautiful parables on forgiveness in today's gospel.

HOMILY: It's important to feel safe and secure. As we live under constant warnings of possible terrorism, as we remember the tragedy of 9/11 this weekend, as we face another powerful hurricane headed in our direction, as we mark the loss of over 1000 American lives in Iraq, and as the ban on attack weapons is about to expire, we know we are not as secure as we would like to be. We are the greatest nation in the world and we are vulnerable on many fronts. Now, I'm not here to preach doom and gloom and I'm not here to frighten people. If that were my purpose, I would be able to go on for a much longer time talking about what is wrong or what could go wrong. I am generally optimistic and believe the many positive things in our world far outweigh the negative. And even when bad things happen, I have always been comforted by the words of St. Paul: "For those who love God, everything works out for the best." The key words here are: "For those who love God."

Today we heard the beautiful parable of the prodigal son. Think of how wonderful life was for him after he left home. He had freedom and independence, lots of money, lots of friends, lots of fun and everyday was a new adventure. He felt in control, safe and secure. But things turned sour and suddenly life was miserable. He had broken his connection with the real source of strength and stability in his life. Of course, in Jesus' parable, God is that source of strength and stability, represented by the kind and generous Father.

Sadly, I see too many people today living with the attitude of the prodigal son, trying to enjoy life to its fullest, busy with making money, sports, fun and entertainment and not having time to stay connected to their real source of strength and stability. They have built their own "golden calf" which they worship, sacrificing all their time and energy and resources to it.

Is God going to be forgiving? Of course. That's what our readings are all about today. But God's forgiveness is not a judicial statement that simply says "you continually have done so many terrible things, but I am going to forgive you and let you go free without any punishment or fine or bond to pay." Make sense? Of course not. But that's the concept some people have of God's mercy and forgiveness. God is ready to forgive and forget

everything with one objective in mind: to allow us to change. Notice the second reading - Paul admits to being a blasphemer, a persecutor and arrogant, but he was not forgiven so that he could remain the same blaspheming, persecuting, arrogant person that he already was. Paul was forgiven in order that he could become a new person, an apostle to the world. The purpose of God's forgiveness is to effect a change. Look at the gospel: the lost sheep was found so that it could rejoin the flock. The son was forgiven and reinstated because he came to his senses and did return home.

God's forgiveness and our efforts to live in his grace and love are connected together. In our efforts to change, sometimes we fail many times. But God is patient and will not give up on us, and we cannot give up on ourselves. We will enjoy security and independence only by recognizing our dependence on God, our Father. With all the blessings we enjoy in our country we are moving away from the One who is the source of all these blessings.

I want to end with a quote from Alexis de Tocqueville who came to our country to study our strengths and weaknesses in the 1830's: "I sought for the greatness and genius of America in her commodious harbors and her ample rivers, and it was not there; in the fertile fields and boundless prairies, and it was not there; in her rich mines and her vast world commerce, and it was not there. Not until I went into the churches of America and heard her pulpits, aflame with righteousness, did I understand the secret of her genius and power. America is great because she is good, and if America ever ceases to be good, America will cease to be great."

25th Sunday in Ordinary Time— C Cycle September 19, 2004

INTRODUCTION Our first reading comes from 700 years before Christ. Life around us has changed a lot since then, but human nature hasn't. Israel was enjoying a time of great prosperity, but their prosperity turned their minds away from God. They resented the Sabbath and the new moon, which was a holy day, because these days were set aside to honor God and to spend more time with one's family. It kept them from what they considered the most important thing in life: making money. The ephah and shekel were weights they used to weigh

the produce they bought and to weigh the produce they sold. Apparently they frequently used dishonest weights so they could cheat both supplier and customer. They even exploited their customers by mixing useless materials in with the products they wanted to sell – such as mixing chaff with the wheat.

HOMILY Our first reading is clear about God’s condemnation of dishonesty. In our gospel, we may be left a bit confused. It seems as if Our Lord is speaking in a somewhat approving way of the dishonesty of the steward he tells us about. However, we don’t know the details of his dishonest wheeling and dealing. The steward may have squandered his master’s property by living in a lavish life style, or he may have been careless and negligent in the way he managed the farms or businesses he was charged with caring for. Likewise, to assure himself of some good friends after he lost his job, he called in all the people who owed his master money and reduced the size of their debt. He may have been cheating his master, or he may have been erasing his commission and giving away what would have been due to him. Apparently his dishonesty was not something that would have put him in jail or he would have been concerned about that rather than being worried about digging or begging. The word that is translated “dishonest” is really a more general term which means he was a selfish, self-centered individual who didn’t care what God or anyone else thought. He cared only about himself. But Our Lord doesn’t have to give us all the financial details of this story. A parable is meant to be a simple story with one simple point. And the simple point is this steward wasted no time in providing for his own future wellbeing. We who want to be spiritual need to be just as clever and just as swift in providing for our eternal interests.

We are stewards of the time, the talents, and the material resources that we’ve been given. We’re the ones who decide how best to use those gifts. We can waste them, we can use them to serve only our own selfish interests, we can use them in such a way that pleases the Lord who has blessed us as he did.

Let me expand on this using time as an example. How many times I've heard people say I would like to pray more, I would like to do more to help others, etc., "when I have more time." Getting more time is not a matter of adding more hours to the day no matter how hard we try. Time management is a matter of setting priorities. The steward in today's gospel had his set of priorities and he didn't say, "I'll take care of those when I get more time." I used to frequently have difficulty getting some of my meditation in during the day. Once I decided to put meditation at the top of the list of things I had to do that day, I never had any difficulty after that. I'm not saying it's the very first thing I do in the morning, sometimes it's close to the last thing I do at night, but it always takes priority over any other discretionary time I have that day.

Another example involves material resources. Do we need them? Of course. Too often material things, especially money, is equated with happiness and power and acquiring it can take over people's lives. When that happens, they become its slave. Jesus wants us to use it wisely, but not let it become our master. We must serve only God and we can't serve two masters. One way of keeping our perspective in this area is to tithe. It reminds us of where our blessings come from. Now we can't give things back to God. We can only give God our time and our thanks (and again I remind you the greatest thanks we can offer is the Eucharist – a word which means thanksgiving). But we can give to charity. Remember Our Lord's words: "what you have done to the least of my brothers and sisters, you have done for me." I think that's what Our Lord means when he says "make friends for yourselves with filthy money, so that when it fails, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings." Jesus tells us today as "children of the light" we have to provide for our spiritual lives just as seriously as people provide for their material needs. In other words, "be smart!" This life is only temporary (important as it may be), but the next life will last forever. If we decide to think seriously about it when we get more time, we run the very real risk that we will run out of time.

26th Sunday in Ordinary Time– C Cycle
2004

September 26,

INTRODUCTION: It's a good thing we don't hear from the prophet Amos every week or, like the people of his own day, we would be crying out "Enough is enough." They chased him out of town because they didn't like his message. He can really make a person feel guilty, especially those who are well off (and compared to the rest of the world that includes almost all of us here today.) Last week's first reading was from Amos and so is today's. As I mentioned last week, Amos lived about 700 years before Christ. It was a time of great prosperity in Israel. This week we hear him condemn those who were living lives of luxury and comfort and were not concerned over the fact that their country was falling apart socially and morally. Its decline would go from weakness to its ultimately being conquered by the Assyrians. The nation of Israel is here referred to as Joseph, one of the sons of Israel whose descendants inherited a major portion of the Promised Land. Although the people rejected Amos and his warning, history proved him to be a true prophet.

HOMILY

If you were looking forward to the traditional money talk today, I'm sorry to disappoint you. Today is Stewardship Sunday in our Archdiocese, but I wanted to run a few ideas past our Parish Pastoral Council before I give my annual report on parish finances. So you have something to look forward to.

Interestingly enough our first reading and gospel for today force us to consider our personal attitude toward the material blessings we enjoy. The essence of today's readings is no matter how hard we've worked or how talented we may be or how thrifty we've been, what we have is not just for our own selfish pleasure. We must share with others. The irony of this is that on the whole, those who have less of this world's goods understand this more clearly than those who have been blessed with more. I say this because statistics show that, in general, the more income a person has the less, percentage wise, they give to charity. That is irony.

Amos and Jesus are not saying a person will automatically be condemned because they are wealthy or will automatically be saved because they are poor. We will all be judged by the same law, the great commandment of love - love for God and love for others. I know people who are well off and at the same time they are very loving and generous, and I know people who are poor who are self-centered and egotistical. Having wealth is not necessarily a vice and being poor is not necessarily virtuous. The rich man in today's gospel was condemned not because he was a bad man, cruel, violent or evil; he was condemned for a lack of love. For him Lazarus just didn't exist. We hear in today's gospel about a great chasm that existed between the two when they went to the other side. I think it was the rich man who created this chasm, keeping himself separated from Lazarus. He just ended up on the wrong side of it in the next life. Even there he hadn't been able to stop seeing Lazarus as someone there to serve his wants, wanting him to get him some water, wanting him to go to his brothers.

It seemed to be a good idea to have Lazarus come back from the dead to shock his brothers into changing their lives, but Abraham said it would not work. He said they had all they needed to know the difference between right and wrong, between being loving and being selfish. If they wouldn't pay attention to God's law, given to us through Moses and the prophets, nothing would change them.

Probably no society in the history of this world has provided more comfort to more people than we have in America today. Kings and emperors did not live as well as most middle class families in America. Comfort is not sinful. But it is dangerous. And it is distracting. It can make us turn our attention increasingly toward ourselves and help us to forget about our responsibilities for the society in which we live, our responsibilities for the people around us who are not as comfortable as we are – and are not likely to become so. Most people in America live pretty well, but even in our own land we have plenty of hurting people lying at the gate, not to mention those living outside of the United States.

Most often Jesus' words are very comforting, but today's readings may make a person uncomfortable, especially a person who may need to become more aware of the destitution of others. Jesus doesn't make

people uncomfortable just for the enjoyment of it, but to help us think about what God wants from us and if we are doing what he wants? Jesus wants only one thing, our salvation, and the only way that can happen is if we follow the way he has shown us.

We can't solve all the world's problems. If you're like me, you probably get dozens of appeals for help of all kinds and some of it is very pathetic. You can't answer them all. I can't answer them all. But we can help with some. We have to find our own level of comfort that will allow us to sleep at night, doing what we can do to be the kind of loving, caring person Christ would want us to be. If we keep remembering where our blessings come from, then we will be more likely to remember that they have not been given to us just to help us become selfish, self-centered people.

Our great prayer of thanksgiving each week, which we call the Mass or the Eucharist, helps us to keep remembering where our blessings come from.