CONNECT! SUNDAY REFLECTION

30th Sunday in Ordinary Time | For Sunday, October 23, 2022

Be Humble and Bear Fruit

Written by Br. John-Marmion Villa, BSC

Sirach 35:12-14, 16-18
2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18
Luke 18:9-14



St. Dorotheus of Gaza said, "In some kinds of trees, no fruit is produced as long as the branches grow upwards; but if somebody takes a stone and binds it to a branch and pulls it down, then the branch will bear fruit. It is similar with a soul; when it humbles itself, it bears fruit, and the more fruit it bears, the humbler the soul becomes. The more the saints approach God, the more they see themselves as sinners."

A few years ago, I was caught in disobedience here at the monastery. I argued the righteousness of my position, until I heard the sound of arrogance coming through my words. I was quite horrified because I had never spoken like that before. It was a humiliating experience to admit my fault in a chapter meeting and to ask for forgiveness publicly. But I learned a huge lesson that day: my own sense of righteousness can lead to my downfall. While I now regret the decision I made that day, I realize there's a wisdom that comes from experience, something that cannot be gained through reading a book. Perfectionism is, perhaps, just another word for self-righteousness, the sense that I am entitled to live my life the way I see fit. There is a human prudence here, certainly. But from another perspective, self-determination can often put us at odds with God's will in our lives … as I learned that day years ago.

Humility is difficult for us because it is an admission of submission to a higher authority. In other words, it is giving someone else (aka, God) the permission to be in the driver's seat of our lives.

It is for this reason that the Rule of St. Benedict outlines 12 steps towards growing in humility. The fifth step deals with the revelation of thoughts to an elder. This isn't the same as sacramental Confession, but "the revelation of secret thoughts to an elder was a central practice among the early monks, less for the content of the elder's response than for the self-knowledge it evoked in the monk. Speaking honestly about oneself to an elder was considered a means of testing objectively the reality of private imaginations." (Michael Casey, "Living in the Truth: St. Benedict's Teaching on Humility"). One can liken it to having conversations with a therapist or spiritual director or sharing in an accountability group. When we find the courage to share vulnerably in a healthy manner, we verbalize what were mere thoughts in our minds, and we can learn to see the accuracy and/or the distortions in our thought processes before we take action.

While this kind of humble attitude is not easy to pursue, it does have an added benefit: it endears you to others. I saw a graphic on Facebook recently that said, "Those who talk about their strengths build walls; those who talk about their weaknesses build bridges." Think about this in your own life: who are the types of people that attract your attention? And who are those who turn away your attention?

Perhaps this is the lesson that Jesus wants to teach us in today's Gospel: humility, or radical self-honesty, is a necessary component of our faith. It is precisely this depth of self-knowledge that can begin to open us up to a deeper knowledge of God beyond what can be read in books or blogs or heard in podcasts or at conferences. Can you imagine what life would be like if our deepest thoughts could be gently received? Can you imagine what life could be like if we knew that there would be no condemnation for sharing the darkness of our interior dimension? Can you imagine the relief of knowing that our distorted self-talk no longer had control of our lives?

Indeed, I am no different than the rest of humanity in that I am a sinner. But also indeed, it is for this reason that Jesus is the savior for humanity. Let's learn to call upon our need for a savior by remembering that we all have needs for which Jesus is the only remedy.

Br. John-Marmion Villa, BSC

Prayer

God, I am far too often influenced by what others think of me.
I am always pretending to be either richer or smarter or nicer than I really am.
Please prevent me from trying to attract attention.
Don't let me gloat over praise on one hand or be discouraged by criticism on the other,
nor let me waste time weaving imaginary situations in which the most heroic, charming, witty person present is myself.
Show me how to be humble of heart, like You.