

TEXT: Luke 14:1, 7-14
THEME: Humility contains in itself the answer
to all the great problems of the life of the soul
SUBJECT: Humility
TITLE: Humility Against Despair

Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost
01 September 2019
Messiah Moravian
Jerry Harris

In the conclusion to *The Varieties of Religious Experience* William James wrote: “Our solar system, with its harmonies, is seen now as but one passing case of a certain sort of moving equilibrium in the heavens, realized by a local accident in an appalling wilderness of worlds where no life can exist. In a span of time which as a cosmic interval will count as but an hour, it will have ceased to be.

“It is impossible, in the present temper of scientific imagination, to find in the drifting of the cosmic atoms anything but a kind of aimless weather, doing and undoing, achieving no proper history, and leaving no result. Nature has no one distinguishable ultimate tendency with which it is possible to feel a sympathy.

“The bubbles on the foam which coats a stormy sea are floating episodes, made and unmade by the forces of the wind and water. Our private selves are like those bubbles; their destinies weigh nothing and determine nothing in the world’s irremediable current of events.”

In this eloquent hymn to our nothingness, James gives expression to what we fear may be the way things are. Staring into the vast darkness, the unending randomness of numberless stars, can produce a sense of diminishment.

A New Yorker cartoon shows an astronomer standing next to a giant telescope, the night sky star illumined. The astronomer responds to a friend: “When I stare off into space I do feel small and insignificant, but when I look around at the rest of humanity I regain my equanimity.”

Our fear of nothingness gives us vertigo and a longing for a foot hold. The easiest way to regain our equilibrium is by comparing ourselves with others. To assuage our fear we need to find some advantage we can maintain against others.

Jesus’ advice to the dinner guests can be read as nothing more than a strategy for playing the game. Fight for the lowest position, which still assumes a pecking order, and hope to be called up higher. When your name is called, hold your head high, nose in the air, as you move on up the ladder of prestige.

Our struggle for the best seats at the table of life reveals our fear that life is but a game, a game that cannot be won for we are but bubbles on a sea of nothingness, tossed to and fro by the wind. Perhaps the creation of a celebrity culture betrays our practical atheism.

In the culture of Jesus' day, honor and shame were powerful determiners of behavior. In our culture shamelessness is celebrated. A popular TV show, "Shameless," won 14 awards in 2018, including Golden Globes and Emmys.

Shamelessness is a sign of despair. When nothing matters, ultimately, we have no reason to be concerned with honor or honorable behavior. As long as I have more Twitter followers than you, as long as I command attention, who cares what anyone thinks?

Despair, Thomas Merton reminds us, is the absolute extreme of self-love. Despair is the final stage of a pride so great and so stubborn that it prefers the misery of being nothing to the hope of happiness.

Within each of us is hidden some root of despair because each of us harbors a pride that springs weeds of self-pity as soon as our own resources fail, and fail they will, eventually. No one yet, no matter how famous, how powerful, how wealthy, has beaten death.

But a truly humble person cannot despair, because in the humble person there is no longer any such thing as self-pity. Humility contains in itself the answer to all the great problems of the life of the soul. In perfect humility all selfishness disappears for the soul no longer lives for itself.

Luke doesn't tell us what seat Jesus chose or if he was asked to move on up by the host? The position Jesus chose at the table of life was at the tired feet of weary travelers, washing away the dirt and worries of the day. Jesus' commitment to a life of service was empowered by a trust in a God who acclaims human worth in the face of dishonor and disdain.

Who would ever invite Jesus to dinner? He doesn't compliment the chef on the food nor does he praise the host's taste in wine. He criticizes the self-aggrandizing behavior of the other guests and berates the host for self-interested hospitality. Remember this the next time we pray, "Come Lord Jesus, our guest to be and bless these gifts bestowed by thee."

Jesus redirects the self-interested attention of the host to the objective reality of the poor. When you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. Then you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.

Lets be honest, we find it easier to believe we are bubbles on a sea of nothingness than to believe in the resurrection of the righteous. We spend our lives fighting for honor and worth, or worse squander our lives in shameless behavior, because we despair of a God who is the source of human dignity let alone One who raises the dead, righteous or shameless.

What if the antidote to despair is humble service to the poor? What if by attending to the objective reality of the suffering of others we discover meaning, worth and dignity?