Nu'uanu Congregational Church

Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost

September 4, 2022

Neal MacPherson

*Humility*  Proverbs 25:6–7

Psalm 112

Luke 14:1, 7–14

To be sure, this morning’s readings from the Book of Proverbs and the Gospel of Luke are focused on humility. Jesus uses the wisdom of Proverbs to paint a more complete picture. When you are invited to a wedding banquet, he says, do not sit down at the place of honor, lest someone more distinguished than you has been invited by your host, and you may have to give up your seat, much to your embarrassment. No, it’s best to take a lower seat. Maybe that is why everybody sits in the back of the church. Who knows, eventually your host might invite you to take a higher seat. Jesus concludes his little description of the way of humility with words familiar to us: “For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”

Whenever I hear the words from Proverbs and the Gospel of Luke read for us today, I cannot help but remember the time when forty years ago, in 1982, I was invited to give the sermon at a service celebrating the 150th anniversary of Lili'uokalani Protestant Church. The church was filled to capacity. As the service began, Princess Abigail Kawānanakoa arrived unexpectedly. The service came to a screeching halt as he ushers hurried to the front row and asked all the people sitting there to leave in order to make room for the Princess and her companions. It sounds like the poor fellow at the banquet who was asked to take a lower seat because someone more important had arrived.

Yes, at face value, this passage from Luke’s Gospel is about the virtue of humility. However, I believe that on a deeper level, it describes the essential movement of the Christian faith. Christian faith entails a downward journey, a journey to “the lower seat” so to speak. Christian faith is a downward movement.

It is a downward movement because of the downward movement of Jesus himself. This is expressed most wonderfully in the famous hymn found in Paul’s Letter to the Philippians. We are to have the same mind within ourselves as was in Christ,

*who, though he was in the form of God,*

*did not regard equality with God*

*as something to be exploited,*

*but emptied himself,*

*taking the form of a slave,*

*being born in human likeness.*

*And being found in human form,*

*he humbled himself*

*and became obedient to the point of*

*death—*

*even death on a cross.*

Much of conventional Christianity has been focused not on a downward movement but on an upward movement, a movement from earth to heaven. The goal, it seems, has been to get to heaven. To be saved is to be saved for heaven. This seems a bit strange in light of the incarnation. The whole movement of God becoming embodied in Jesus of Nazareth is a movement from heaven to earth. So why would we want to move from earth to heaven?

In a wonderful sermon on humility, preached in 1980 at the Riverside Church in New York, William Sloane Coffin had this to say:

. . . humility comes from the Latin “*humus,*” which means “earth.” I think Christians should be more earthly—not only earthly, but earthy. Certain it is that we are earthbound. Those who think differently, who think we should head straight for heaven forget that on our way up there we shall pass, on his way down, the Son of God himself. If Heaven comes to earth, why on earth should anyone head for Heaven? Isn’t that spiritual arrogance? Isn’t that saying with the Pharisee, “I thank God I am not as other people are?

—William Sloan Coffin,

“On Humility,” October 12, 1980

Christians, in imitation of Christ himself, are earthbound. We are invited to join other followers of Christ in a downward journey. This downward journey becomes the basis for our witness in the world. As those who are earthbound, we will be concerned about the health of the earth itself. We will be led to a faithful stewardship of the creation. Not only that, but we will also be turned towards those who are at the bottom: the crippled, the poor, the lame, and the blind when we give a banquet. The life of the Christian is to take place among the least rather than the greatest. We will be content to be earthy, as William Sloan Coffin puts it.

I learned this from my father. A Baptist preacher, Dad was most fulfilled when he was the pastor of the George Street Baptist Church in Fredericton, New Brunswick. Working class families formed the membership of the George Street church during the days he was there. The labor movement was a vital force in the drive for economic equality. The social gospel was an important influence in the church, and Dad preached it well. He also identified with the members of the church, so much that he was asked from time to time to represent workers in the negotiations with their employers. Dad kept his sympathies alive throughout his ministry, something I always remember each year as Labor Day approaches. He once told me that he was far more content visiting a struggling family in the country than an established family in the town.

Yes, Christian faith calls for a downward mobility. But we need to face the fact that this downward movement is counter cultural. Our culture is enamored with upward, not downward mobility. The goal is to get ahead, to climb the ladder of success, to become secure and gain control over our lives. To do so we must strive to take the high road. The Christian who undertakes the movement downwards will not feel all that comfortable in the culture that surrounds us.

In a book some of you have read, called *Falling Upward,* Richard Rohr helps us relate the tension between downward and upward mobility to our personal lives. Rohr’s book describes the movements that belong to the two halves of our lives. The first half of our lives, say up to the age of forty or fifty, is all about upward mobility. These are the years when we strive to climb the ladder, to establish ourselves, to gain security and stability for our families and ourselves. Rohr, by the way, laments the way our churches cater, sometimes almost exclusively, to those who are younger and neglect the wisdom of those who are older. Those who are older, he says, are the mainstay of any congregation. They are the ones who have journeyed beyond the drives and passions of the young. They have begun to experience the suffering that comes with age—the deaths of loved ones, the gradual diminishment of mental and physical capabilities, transitions such as divorce and disease. They have embarked on the downward journey, which is the journey of faith. And because their journey is downward, they embody more than the young the way of Christ. They live the spirit of the Gospel. For the Gospel declares that newness of life comes not when we are on the high road but on the low road. Resurrection comes by way of a cross. Hope for eternal life comes on the downward journey. All this our elders can teach the young.

It is great to be part of a congregation that brings together the young and those who are older, those who struggle economically and those who are more comfortable, those who have experienced tragedy in their lives and those who have not yet arrived at the beginning of the downward journey. What a blessing to be able to share with one another our life experiences, our suffering, our hopes and our dreams.

So, my friends, let’s just be earthly, even earthy. We are not self-righteous people mouthing pious words; we are simply human beings together, sharing the experiences, the joys and the sorrows, the high points and the failures, the fears and the hopes and the faith that make up our lives. Isn’t that what being “earthy” is all about?

William Sloane Coffin concludes his sermon on humility with these words, “Be humble, i.e., earthy, forgiven, loving, and full of joy.” I like that. That is our task as earthbound followers of the Christ who emptied himself and took on the form of a slave and was obedient unto death, even death upon a cross. Let us remember always the words of Jesus: “For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”

So, if we are young, let us be prepared for the downward journey, and if we are older, let us, with courage and confidence, continue the journey. And yes, let us be humble—earthy, forgiven, loving, and full of joy, now, today, and tomorrow, even as we pray for God’s will to be done on earth as it is in heaven. Amen.