

A sermon preached by the Revd RL Ficks III at Church of the Good Shepherd, Houlton Maine the Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost (9/1), 2019

Proverbs 25:6-7; Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16; Luke 14:1, 7-14

A friend of mine tells of a High School reunion he attended recently...his fiftieth in fact. Upon arriving, he was horrified at how ancient all his old classmates looked and was inwardly quite pleased that he had avoided getting so out of shape and either bald or gray. At one point, he found himself standing next to a fellow he didn't really recognize...though he thought he might vaguely recall him. Somewhat smugly he gloated a bit at what he perceived as their very different states of wear and tear. He introduced himself...as did the other fellow. My friend commented, "You know, I think you were in one of my classes." The other fellow responded, "Oh really, which subject did you teach?"

So much for the hubris that allows us to think we are somehow different...or better...or able to exist in a different sort of reality than the rest of the run of humanity. And welcome to the humility of which Christ speaks in this morning's Gospel.

What is it about human nature that seems so inevitably to freight it with the undeniable need to seek some sense of difference from the rest of humanity? What is it that demands that we find manners and modes that allow us to feel we are "better"...more "important"...more "special?"

Why do we feel so threatened when we are perceived a simply "ordinary?"

The world is awash in means through which we can achieve some measure of the extraordinary. Usually, we are told, through the purchase of something...a house, a car, a piece of clothing, a vacation...or whatever.

It is hardly an insight of particular acuity or originality to note that all these things wear out...or become passé...or become, even, embarrassing. Goodness, I own a couple pair of pants that are certainly extraordinary...but only because they are now, rather than being, as they once were, all the rage, of such extraordinary bad taste as to be horrifying.

I suspect our striving for such things, to some measure, reflects a belief, irrational though it may be, that, through them, we are not subject to wearing out...just like everyone else. "If I can just keep being different and extraordinary and more important and more successful than everyone else, maybe I can escape the same fate as everyone else...maybe I won't have to play by the same rules." Obviously, my suggestion is an overstatement, but, equally obviously, it is my observation that all of us, to one degree or another and at sometime, falls into such behavior and thinking.

Jesus speaks quite vehemently to his followers and insists that they are to seek consciously to avoid such thinking...avoid trying always to find a means to separate themselves from the common run of humanity.

He calls us to reckon with the reality that, if we are not secure enough within ourselves to be content with being one with the world around us, then we will never find any real measure of security or peace. Our constant striving after something “more” will be no more productive than trying to grab the wind.

The words of the writer of Proverbs are equally clear. Thinking too much of ourselves is a sure path to disappointment...if not the downright loss of our human dignity by a failure to be secure enough within ourselves to accept what God has chosen to do in creating us...chosen to make us how and what and who we truly are.

It has been my experience, over and over, as I have visited with new members of the various Parishes I have served over the years, especially the somewhat younger members who are raising families, that I find they say to me, in one form or another, we are seeking something that doesn't change with every new model...that has some measure of stability and dependability...that we can count on and teach our children.

For the world has come to a place in which so very much changes so very rapidly. I do not think it is simply seventy-five years talking when I note that there is a new computer program available at the drop of a hat (and, equally, to note that each one is just a wee bit different enough from its predecessor as to confound utterly the user); that the social and sexual mores of the last fifty years have changed in manners almost beyond comprehension; that the means by which we communicate are changing so rapidly it is numbing; that no ten scholars can any longer agree on a book list of the texts absolutely essential to a well-educated human being; and on and on and on.

What is it that we are to depend on...what is it these new families starting out in their lives are to depend on...what is it the young people of our acquaintance are to depend upon? The writer to the Hebrews says without equivocation, it is Jesus of Nazareth...the same yesterday and today and forever.

It doesn't matter where we turn this morning, the Old Testament or Epistle or Gospel...we are overwhelmed with the necessity of seeking to live humbly...or being content with what we have and seeking to understand and refine how we live...with recognizing that we are the same as each of our fellow journeyers...and all we can really control in this journey is how we will live as we make it.

It isn't, I am afraid, a terribly flashy or compelling position...but, then again, once we are tired enough of spending the years allotted us in the pursuit of being extraordinary...perhaps, just perhaps, we will decide that there is another way...and, though we may have to share it with many others, it just might work.