

In the Name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Beware of practicing your piety before others *in order to be seen by them*;
for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven. (Matthew 6:1,
NRSV)

The problem here is not the practice of piety, but that disturbance in the soul called “pride.” Pride is an accepting of God’s grace in vain (2 Cor. 6:1) so that the goodness of God simply bounces off us without much making us better, so that we are still stuck on ourselves. It is a confusion in our life of love, a thunderstorm, a fog obscuring our neighbors, so that we can hardly see them, we are so preoccupied with ourselves.

Take the one giving alms, for example: If he gives alms to the poor, then that is certainly good and it is a blessing for the poor. But if the almsgiver did his or her good deed “in order to be seen by them,” then the poor man is blessed, but the almsgiver is not as richly blessed as he should be, as she should be. Things will be better for the almsgiver when his charity truly amounts to the practice of love, rather than participation in the vice of vainglory. For vainglory drags us down, as do all the vices.

Pride is the “black hole” of our soul. It has the capacity to curve reality toward itself. We can hardly walk by a mirror without pride curving our face around to catch a quick glance of ourselves. That’s a fairly innocent example, I know, and I do it too, but it is from such small steps that a prideful disposition is built. And when pride becomes a habit of the soul, then we lose our feel for love of God and love of neighbor.

In the early days of the Church, the desert fathers believed that the cure for pride was the practice of humility. Indeed, they believed that humility was the main path toward love. Humility is a setting of the soul toward others. It is as if humility fixes hold of our vision and shifts it away from ourselves toward a world out there waiting for our help.

They tended to live in the Near East, those desert fathers and mothers -- in Egypt, or Palestine, or Syria, in the fourth through sixth centuries¹. Jesus had captured their hearts and their imaginations, and in earnest desire to construct a new way of life, a Christ-like way of life, they had abandoned the towns and villages and started afresh in the desert, in monasteries or the huts of hermits.

They sought to be humble people, but not “humble” as we might think of it. For them, humility was no downhearted, low estimation of themselves, but something much more glorious: it was the attempt to see both themselves and their neighbors through the eyes of Christ’s compassion. For them, humility was a heroic virtue.

Humility, then, was the antidote for a prideful disposition. Pride is not built in a day. It is built brick by brick from the little indulgences, self-regarding glances, flattering words we whisper to ourselves, and lines in the sand we draw and will not

¹ Roberta C. Bondi, *To Love As God Loves* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), pg. 10.

condescend to go beyond. And, likewise, humility is not build in a day, but rather through the small steps of granting dignity to others, including ourselves.

There seems to be two sides to it -- two sides to the practice of humility. One is sympathy with the weaknesses and vulnerabilities of humanity, remembering that we too are sinners. The other side of humility is rejoicing in the miracle of each human life. It is to cultivate a feeling of awe before a masterpiece of God's creation: I mean men and women, boys and girls.

Let's start off with humility's sympathy for the weaknesses of others. I have heard it said once, and I agree with it, that there are no sweeter words than these: "There, but for the grace of God, go I." The one who can go through the day often repeating that saying to himself, to herself, is the one on the path of humility: "There, save for the grace of God, go I."

That is why the desert fathers and many of the saints through the ages have been so kind-hearted toward the sinner. With plain and simple hearts, they have tried to follow the example of Jesus on the cross, who comforted the malefactor dying with him with these words, "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise."

Here is one of the desert stories along these lines:

Abba Ammonas came one day to eat in a place where there was a monk of evil repute. Now it happened that a woman came and entered the cell of the brother of evil reputation. The dwellers of that place, having learned this, were troubled and gathered together to chase the brother from his cell. Knowing that Bishop Ammonas was in the place, they asked him to join them. When the brother in question learned this, he hid the woman in a large cask. The crowd of monks came to the place. Now Abba Ammonas saw the position clearly, but for the sake of God he kept the secret; he entered, seated himself on the cask, and when they had searched everywhere without finding the woman, Abba Ammonas said, "What is this? May God forgive you for this accusation!" After praying he made everyone go out, then taking the brother by the hand he said, "Brother, be on your guard." With these words, he withdrew.²

Father Ammonas was not the sinner here; the monk of evil repute was. Yet the old man knew about himself that he too was liable to sin. He was humble enough to judge that the distance between himself and the fallen monk was but an eyelash. And so, he practiced that kind of humility that sympathizes with the failings of others. Of such deeds is the life of love built.

Can we learn to look at our neighbor, even the lowly or the fallen neighbor, and remember that in God's eyes, that one is precious?

Remember the Bible's testimony about humanity -- not just the people of Israel and the Church, but of all our race:

³When I consider thy heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and the stars, which thou hast ordained;

² Ibid., pp. 53-54.

⁴What is man, that thou art mindful of him? and the son of man, that thou visitest him?

⁵For thou hast made him a little lower than the angels, and hast crowned him with glory and honour.(Psalm 8:3-5, KJV)

Naturally, we should do the best we can to treasure the gifts, experiences, and talents that have been given to us. The Bible is right that to some the Lord gives ten talents, and to others five talents, and to us maybe only one or two talents. And we are indeed called to be good stewards of those talents.

And yet, is it a prideful disposition that keeps us from accepting that lowly job? Is it pride that drives us to max out of credit cards so that we can acquire nice things as we suppose people *like us* deserve?

To use an example that does not apply to us here in the city, but is one which country folk might understand and which might make the point: Could we see ourselves working in the chicken factory, chasing around fleeing chickens, working on the line, packing and hauling the boxes of chicken parts, worn out by the end of the day, but with a paycheck to look forward to in order to take care of our family? If we can remember that the factory worker too is God's glorious creature, "a little lower than the angels...crowned with glory and honour," then maybe we would be humble enough to take the work we can actually get in a troubled economy. Maybe we could put away our credit cards and live more simply, for even then, we are glorious! Maybe then this world would have some more missionaries -- at least for a while during the course of a long life. Maybe then, there would be more *pro bono* work on behalf of the poor. Maybe then there would be the practice of piety, not to be seen by others, but simply as part of the life of love like that of Jesus.

One of the chief things about Jesus is that he practiced humility. He who had all the wealth of heaven and was adored by the angels, was content to be a poor man, with nowhere to lay his head. He did not think it below him to be a poor man. And though he was without sin, he never lost his feel for the glory of any human being. He never lost his love for sinners. And so, it was murmured against him that he was a friend of sinners, that he was willing to associate and even to sup with tax collectors and sinners. Altogether, when St. Paul contemplates Jesus, the chief thing Paul sees is that Jesus humbled himself, even emptied himself.(Philippians 2) And such divine humility is very much to our benefit.

Lent asks us to follow Jesus in his methods of humility. That will give us a chance to love more in this world. The traditional Lenten disciplines of prayer, fasting, and almsgiving are all calculated to pull us back some from a prideful disposition, and thereby to free us to love God and our neighbor even more than we already do.

The goal of piety is to love God and our neighbor more. So, look for those hindrances in your life that slow you down in love and try to overcome them, even if only a little bit at first. In this way, we will come to resemble our Lord Jesus more and bring credit to his Name, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.