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Lessons in Luke:

Humility

Luke 14:1a, 7-11

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Somewhere in Southeast Asia there is a young man whose name we'll never know, whose community we'll never visit, and whose impact around the globe is nearly beyond our comprehension. This young man engages in several simple, seemingly insignificant random acts of kindness that are deeply rooted in humility and have been seen by nearly one hundred million people around the world. He gives up his bus seat to a woman who is standing. He brings bananas to an elderly neighbor. He donates money to a young girl on the street who is raising funds to pay for an education. While he's doing these things, though, other people shake their heads in disbelief, unable to understand the benefit that the young man gets from giving to strangers all the time. Undaunted and undeterred, this young man has a deep sense of humility that drives him to do what he does and can inspire us to do the same. We'll come back to this story in a little while.

Understanding humility is complicated. Practicing humility is challenging. Part of what makes humility such a challenge is the temptation to reduce humility to a checklist of activities that we think make us better, humbler people. For instance, I read an article in *Forbes* magazine recently that listed "13 Habits of Humble People." The further I read, the better I felt about myself! "Humble people listen well. Humble people put others first. Humble people speak their minds, are good at setting boundaries, and have a high degree of Emotional Intelligence. Humble people have a great deal of self-awareness, they have an 'abundance' mentality, and they take time to say, 'Thank you.' Humble people accept feedback. Humble people have a lot of patience." I'll just wait a moment while you think about that one. Now, if you were keeping track, that's 10 out of 13. That's pretty good! I do have to say, that generally speaking, I was sort of killing it on the "humble-o-meter." Well, it didn't take long for me to snap out of that and begin to ask, "Is

this really what humility is?" Is humility really about nailing a list of qualities and characteristics to become humbler? Is humility really about getting all of those things just right? There's a story from the 14th chapter of Luke that sheds some light on this for us.

[Luke 14:1a, 7-11] *One time when Jesus went for a Sabbath meal with one of the top leaders of the Pharisees, [he told] a story to the guests around the table. Noticing how each had tried to elbow into the place of honor, he said [this]: "When someone invites you to dinner, don't take the place of honor. Somebody more important than you might have been invited by the host. Then he'll come and call [you] out in front of everybody, 'You're in the wrong place. The place of honor belongs to this man.' [Embarrassed] Red-faced, you'll have to make your way to the very last table, the only place left. "[Rather,] When you're invited to dinner, go and sit at the last place. Then when the host comes, he may very well say, 'Friend, come up to the front.' That will give the dinner guests something to talk about! What I'm saying is, if you walk around with your nose in the air, you're going to end up flat on your face. But if you're content to be simply yourself, you will become more than yourself."*

This is the word of God, for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

As usual, a lot is going on in this passage. But I have to tell you, the one thing that really stands out for me is that last line: *"If you're content to be simply yourself, you will become more than yourself."*

That was the message Jesus delivered while sitting at the table in the Pharisee's house. Quick review: The Pharisees were a 1st-century group of religious lawyers who were known for their strict observance of the traditional and written law. They had perfectly mastered each one of the 613 laws which, from their perspective, set them apart from everyone else. They were using that to try to impress everyone else and to curry favor with those in power. The invitation to Jesus to come and eat with them wasn't really about sharing a meal with some friends. It was an excuse for the Pharisees to be seen and heard by others and to position themselves favorably in the community. That's the way things got done in the 1st century. In the first century, social status and social stratification were vital aspects of everyday life. Where you were in the pecking order determined every aspect of your

life - your work, your income, who you could associate with, who you could be seen with – it all mattered a lot. Even where you sat at the table for a community meal mattered. Proximity to the host was a powerful expression of 1st century status. Status was something for you to compete for and grasp, and if you climbed up the social order it was accomplished by your own efforts. Our status and our standing are that we are beloved children of God. This is all a gift of grace from God and not something that we achieve by any effort on our part. This takes us right back to Jesus' last word: "If you're content to be simply yourself, you will become more than yourself." And that leads us to an important question: "How do we learn to become content with simply being ourselves so that God can equip us become more than ourselves?"

To understand that we need to explore what humility is. The word humility is - no pun intended, grounded and rooted deeply in the Latin word humus, which means earth, or ground, soil, dirt – all of the things gathered up into the hands of God when we were created, and life was breathed into us. We are simply, and essentially humus in God's hands, constantly being formed and fashioned into the image of God every day. Humility is about embracing our essential selves that God is working through, and seeing ourselves as the humus, the ground, the soil, the dirt of the garden into which God is planting seeds that God nurtures into something which brings life to the world. When Jesus challenged the dinner guests to stop lifting themselves up by putting everyone else down, he wanted them to see themselves as growing into those whom God was creating them to be. Jesus was challenging them to be simply themselves so that God could continue to grow them into who they could become. That's humility. Humility isn't something that we learn by studying or trying harder to achieve. Humility isn't about holding up our false selves to others, it's about being our true selves; living into who God is calling us to be for others. That's humility.

When our worship team was talking through all of this, the question came up, "Who would be an example of humility?" And, of course, Mother Teresa came up. Quite possibly every one of us around the table agreed that if we looked in Mother Teresa's high school yearbook, we'd see that she was voted "Most Humble." The question then followed, "So, should we be more like Mother Teresa?" "Well, yea, for sure!" But then we quickly realized, "Nahhh, that's not going to happen." And I would say that should not happen, and here's why.

The question is not how we become more like Mother Teresa. The question is how we become more like our truest, most essential selves that God is creating right now. That is humility. The question is not how we respond to Mother Teresa by doing the things she did. The question is, how did Mother Teresa respond to God's call in her life that allowed her to live into her truest, most essential self, and how is Jesus equipping us to live into our call by doing the things God is calling us to do? That is humility! That kind of humility will make big changes in the world.

It's that kind of humility that inspires us to respond to God's call to live in ways that move us into practicing small, simple, seemingly insignificant, random acts of kindness.

It's that kind of humility that moves us to live like Jesus lived, to do the things that Jesus did, to say the things that Jesus said.

It's that kind of humility that moves us to give up our seat on the bus to someone who is standing.

It's that kind of humility that motivates us to bring groceries to an elderly neighbor.

It's that kind of humility that inspires us to practice the kind of generosity that lives well into the next generation.

It's that kind of humility that looks something like this: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uaWA2GbcnJU>

Friends, practicing humility means being open to all of the ways that God is equipping us to be our truest, most essential selves in our daily lives. And to do that in our homes, and in our neighborhoods, in and through our communities of faith, wherever we live, work and play. Practicing humility can and will make a huge difference in the world. So again, let me ask you to take a moment right now and ask yourself, "How is God nurturing humility within me today?"