

## “Cleaning the Lens”

Luke 14:7-11

Seventeen Sunday After Pentecost

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Christ the King Lutheran Church

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When I think of humility, I almost always think of my grandfather, Les Hanson. Grandpa Les was a man of few words—a trait he passed along, at least in part, to his three sons, which is remarkable, when you think about the professions they chose, the vocations to which they were called: Professor, Preacher, and Lawyer, all public speakers in one way or another. But in more private settings, they were often chips off the old block.

I remember one time that I was together with my grandpa, my dad, and one of my uncles—I don't recall quite what the occasion was—and we sat together and I would be surprised if more than just a handful of words was spoken in over an hour, which was quite the stretch of a rather chatty extravert like me. What's more, in two separate conversations, my dad and my grandpa both later reflected how great a visit it was, and still I can't remember what, if anything, any of us had talked about. For an hour.

Now, I know, being a person of few words is not exactly the same thing as being humble, but the two traits seem to have gone very well together for my grandpa. Beyond typically having so little to say, he was truly humble in so many different ways. First, he came from humble beginnings. He never finished high school—he left school to go to work, to join his own father selling cemetery monuments. Obviously, then, he never went to college, but rather took it upon himself to make something of himself, eventually becoming a successful businessman in his own right, owning and managing a number of gas stations and truck stops throughout Southern Minnesota. Coming of age right at the beginning of the Great Depression, he was humbled time and time again by setbacks and failures before finally hitting his stride, all the while providing well for his family, tithing to his church, supporting local civic causes, and eventually making significant gifts to colleges and seminaries he never attended himself, but which had had an impact on his life through his children, his pastors and others. He was never one to toot his own horn, never one to consider himself anything special or extraordinary, never one to think too highly of himself.

His own sense of humility was just a normal thing—and was an expectation he had of most everyone else around him. In fact, according to my own recollections, about the worst thing

Grandpa Les could ever call you was a “show off.” He didn’t have time for such self-aggrandizing antics. This was true for his own friends and relatives—I heard him call my cousins show-offs enough to imagine that he probably called me that, too, to my cousins. IT was also true for public figures. He hated all the high-fiving in basketball, and was put off by the earliest touchdown dances in the NFL—often quoting Bud Grant who famously said that rather the celebrating in the end zone you should act like you’ve been there before. I would love to see what he’d have to say about athletes today who celebrate every catch, every sack, every free throw and three-point shot with branded celebration moves, let alone the reality-show based political season we seem to be in these days. What a bunch a show offs, he’d says, shaking his head.

What a bunch of show-offs. I imagine Jesus saying the same thing as Grandpa Les as he disapprovingly considered those folks coming to a wedding banquet and snatching up all the seats of honor, whether theirs or not. What a bunch of show-offs. What a bunch of self-exalting show-offs. The word Jesus used from time to time was hypocrites, those who love to go to the temple to show off their flowing robes or expensive outfits, those who make a show of their piety with their wordy prayers and over the top pronouncements, sounding the trumpet before they give to the poor, or worse yet, making a show of giving to the poor on the *Sabbath* only to cheat and steal from the poor the rest of the week. What a bunch of show-offs, what a bunch of hypocrites. “Truly I tell you,” Jesus says. “Truly, I tell you they have received their reward already: and all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, all those who place themselves up on top will be brought down low and anyone who walks around with their nose in the air is going to end up flat on their face.” Jesus says. “But those who humble themselves will be exalted, those who place others first will be honored, and those content simply to be themselves, you will become so much more than themselves.”

At its core, the virtue of humility that Jesus calls us to, or that the apostle Paul writes about in our theme verse from Colossians, this virtue is not that difficult to imagine, not that foreign to who we are at the core of our being. True humility, being truly humble is not a matter of being self-depreciating, of thinking LESS of yourself, but rather it comes down being self-aware and aware of others, to being truly honest with ourselves. It is a matter, as

Paul says, of using sober judgment. It's a matter of being honest. In fact, the only people who grow in truth are those are both humble and honest.

Franciscan priest and author Richard Rohr points out that at their core, Humility and honesty are actually the same thing. "A humble person is simply a person who is brutally honest about the whole truth," he writes. "If we try to use religion to aggrandize the self, we're on the wrong path." [...] "The only honest response to life is a humble one."<sup>1</sup>

According to Father Rohr, the process by which we begin to be honest with ourselves is like the cleansing of a lens—that is, the cleansing of *the* lens through which we see all of life, the whole world, beyond just the parts of ourselves, the parts of the world or the parts of life that we want to see. We clean the lens, he says, as often as we need to in order to get our ego, our own agendas, our own fears, angers, judgments and preconceived notions out of the way. We need to actively, humbly, honestly clear away the dirt from our lenses in order to see things as they really are, as God intends them to be.

This metaphor, this image is one I have come to truly understand in the last three or four years. See, I met most of you in the past two years or so, so you have only ever known me wearing glasses. But the truth is, I only started wearing glasses less than four years ago. I made it to forty, and even to forty-five without needing glasses at all—not that I'm bragging, certainly not on a day with Humility for a theme. No, I'm just being honest. I didn't need glasses, not to see close up, not to see at a distance, not even to read, thank God. All that changed about four, maybe five years ago. My eyes started to get tired at night, and I had a hard time reading especially in low light. Suddenly, it seemed to me, I *needed* glasses to read at night. So I got some cheaters, and then I found I was putting them on and off so much I decided I just needed to bite the bullet and get bifocals—even if they were clear on the top—so that my readers were with me all the time.

I remember being struck by how much better I could read first with cheaters, then with these bifocals. But I also remember how weird it was to look at the world—the entire wide world—through these tiny little rectangular lenses on my face. Some of you know what Im

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Rohr, *Everything Belongs: The Gift of Contemplative Prayer*, New York: Crossroad Publishing, 2003.

talking about—many of you have had glasses for most of your lives. But this was all new to me. So one, day, I was just noticing and pointing out how strange everything seemed through my glasses, how much it took to get used to seeing the world this way. At which point who ever it was I was talking to at that moment said of course it's strange, and then proceed to take the glasses off my face, spray them with a little bottle of something or other, dried them with a dust-free cloth and then handed them back. Talk about a difference. To paraphrase Jimmy Cliff—I could see clearly now the smudges were gone. All it took was cleaning the lenses, and I could see so much better. That's what humility in the form of honesty does for us—it allows us to clean the lenses through which we see the whole world, in order to see things as they really are, as God intends them to be.

One more thing I remember about my Grandpa Les, having to do with his sense of humility, and with his being a man of few words. Later on in life, he once told me and some others at a family gathering that there were times he found it difficult being the quiet, stoic, Minnesota Lutheran of Norwegian descent that he was. One particular occasion in particular, he said, it was so hard to contain himself, to be humble and quiet, to not be a show-off. That moment, he said, was right after receiving communion. He said, after I get the bread and wine, at that moment when I really feel like Christ has taken all *my* sins away, sometimes I just want to shout out Halleluiah like the Baptists down in Alabama or Georgia. Why don't you? My dad asked him. Oh, come on, I wouldn't want to draw attention to myself, give those people at church something to talk about at coffee hour. He's probably right—Les Hanson letting out a hearty Hallelujah as he headed back down the aisle to his pew might have been more than folks at St. John's, Owatonna could have handled at the time. Still, just once I wish he would have done it. I know what I would have done: I would have smiled, smiled ear to ear and filled to overflowing with Humble Pride I would have shook my head and, still smiling, said "What a Show-off." What a humble, compassionate, honest to God show-off. Thanks be to God. Amen.