

Humility

[Luke 14:1, 7-14](#)

When we think about St Benedict and his Rule or Way of Life, most of us think about balance or moderation or hospitality. Yet his longest chapter was about humility. In fact, he lists 12 steps of humility. Some of them are not immediately useful for us today, such as the one that says we should speak only when necessary and without laughter – after all we often associate gentle laughter with holiness; or the one that says that humility is obeying the Rector, I mean abbot, without grumbling. Reviewing them made me think about what steps he might suggest for us today. I came up with six.

1. Remember that you are entirely dependent upon God
2. Surrender your life to God
3. Know your strengths and your weaknesses
4. Know that you are beloved
5. See Christ in others
6. Practice radical acceptance

In today's gospel Jesus talks about humility. I once had a boss who said that he always liked to take a lower seat at the table so that he would be invited up higher. I think he expected me to make sure he was invited up higher.

That's not what this is about. It's like when Jesus tells us "whoever wants to be great among you must be your servant" (Mark 10:43). He is not saying that if you are ambitious for power and status, the way to get there is to be a servant. No. He's turning the whole power and status thing upside down. And Jesus didn't just preach that – he gave us a graphic picture of service and humility when he washed the disciples feet.

So the pathway for the ambitious upward climbing Christian is to become humble and serve - but that does not lead to power and status. It will however lead closer to God.

Benedict said, "brethren, if we wish to reach the greatest height of humility, and speedily to arrive at that heavenly exaltation to which ascent is made in the present life by humility, then, mounting by our actions, we must erect the ladder which appeared to Jacob in his dream, by means of which angels were shown to him ascending and descending (cf Gen 28:12). Without a doubt, we understand this ascending and descending to be nothing else but that we descend by pride and ascend by humility."

"we descend by pride and ascend by humility." We ascend to heavenly exaltation by means of humility. So humility is not going to get you invited to a place of honor at the table in this world, but in the real world, the unseen reign of God, humility is what counts.

So let's take a closer look at the six steps we identified.

- 1. Remember that you are entirely dependent upon God.** God is the source of our being. Without God nothing exists. There's a mythical story about Jesus as a child modeling birds out of clay. But whereas when we make a model bird it is lifeless, Jesus is said to have blown upon the birds and they became alive and flew away. That is the difference between us and God. We are infinitely creative but we cannot give matter life. The breath of life comes from God alone. Without God we are just clay birds. But we don't usually remember that. We often think we can do things on our own, that our accomplishments are our own and even that our life is our own. Sometimes when someone dies we quote Job, "The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away." (Job 1:21) but our focus is on the taken away part. Most of the time we lose sight of "the Lord gave." Our very life is a gift from God.

2. **Surrender your life to God.** This follows closely on the heels of number 1. When we remember that we are dependent upon God it makes sense to turn our lives over to her. After all, who else has the big picture?

This step is like the third step of AA, *“Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood God.”* But we want to be in control. We think that we know best. Our egos want to call the shots. Surrender is not popular in 21st century America. Yet it is the way to healing and wholeness.

3. **Know your strengths and your weaknesses.** Humility does not mean pretending that you do not have the talents and gifts that God has given you. But it does mean having a clear sense of your abilities, your strengths and your weaknesses. Then you can more easily find where God would have you serve and acknowledge and honor the gifts of others. And you have no reason to boast because you know that all is a gift from God.

4. **Know that you are beloved.** God loves you, just the way you are. Period. God knows your strength and your failings. God knows your potential. God loves you just the way you are today. This may be the most important step. When I know that I am beloved just the way I am then I can look others in the eyes, confident in my heritage. I am a beloved child of the living God so I do not need to please you, neither do I need to control you.

Nothing can take me away from God’s love and that is so amazing that when I allow that truth to permeate my being I no longer need status and power. I could be the most outwardly powerful person on earth or the most insignificant but it doesn’t matter because I am a child of God.

5. **See Christ in others.** God loves them too, actually just as much as God loves you. We are equals and we all have foibles and failings. When we see Christ in others then we can be more patient with them. But even more than that, we can honor each other in a different way.

The Buddhist teacher, Jack Kornfield, trained in monasteries in Tibet and India. In his book “After the Ecstasy, the Laundry” he tells of being a novice monk and being expected to bow to everyone who had been ordained longer than him – which was in reality everyone.

He writes; “So I began to bow to them. Sometimes it was just fine – there were quite a few wise and worthy elders in the community. But sometimes it felt ridiculous.... Yet there I was bowing and so... I sought a way to make it work. ...I began to look for some worthy aspect of each person I bowed to. I bowed to the wrinkles around the retired farmer’s eyes, for all the difficulties he had seen and suffered through and triumphed over. I bowed to the vitality and playfulness in the young monks, the incredible possibilities each of their lives held yet ahead of them. I began to enjoy bowing.”

We bow to the Christ in each other and in those we don’t yet know. We especially bow to the Christ in those who are different from us and those who are marginalized in our society.

6. **Radical acceptance.** What is, is. Things are the way they are. Radical acceptance is the spiritual discipline of the serenity prayer. Having the serenity to accept the things which cannot be changed, the courage to change the things that can and the wisdom to know the difference. Instead of thinking, everything would be much better if only... You can add your own if only here: things would

be much better if only... I were younger, if only I exercised more, if only my son would call me... whatever it is for you. Most of us have at least one “if only...”

Radical acceptance is the full embodiment of humility. Knowing that we are God’s beloved and that we have given all things to God allows us to step forward in quiet confidence.

I’m going to give the last word to Benedictine, Joan Chittister. Commenting on Benedict’s rule, she says:

Certainly, another word for humility is authenticity, the grace of being who we say we are.

From where I stand, the way we carry ourselves and talk and look and speak and walk with those around us is the only real proof of our humility. Where insult and expectation, disdain and dismissal of others, arrogance and authoritarianism are evident, they exude indifference to the needs and values, intelligence and insight of others. Then the size of our own soul shrinks under the light of day.

We have never needed more the humility that brings the world together as pride threatens to wrench us apart. In the end, Benedict is right: Stifling arrogance, embarrassing self-aggrandizement, and the insufferable pomposity that pathological pride spawns expose all the empty spots in the soul. And they are gaping. Or as St. Vincent de Paul put it centuries ago, "Humility is nothing but truth, and pride is nothing but lying."¹

¹ <https://www.ncronline.org/news/opinion/where-i-stand/st-benedicts-12th-step-challenge-become-humility-itself>

