

Twenty-second Sunday in Ordinary Time: Humility—Living Under His Mercy

Today's Gospel seems to begin with an etiquette lesson on where to sit at a wedding banquet. But it is a lot more than that, infinitely more than that. In scripture, the banquet, be it a wedding banquet or any other type of banquet, represents the Banquet of the Lord. It refers to being in the Presence of God here on earth and ultimately with Him in heaven. Jesus' instruction is that we shouldn't think that we belong in the best seats in that banquet, closest to the Lord. We are wrong if we think that we are so much better than others. Rather, like the tax collector in the Parable of the Publican and Pharisee in the Temple, we need to have humility. We need to pray, "Lord, have mercy on me a sinner."

It is in this light that I want to tell you about a couple in a graduate program, a husband and wife. This couple hosted prayer meetings and discussions in their residence after dinner for anyone who would come by. At the same time they were convinced that if they were allowed into the Banquet it was only due to the Mercy of God. The husband, Sheldon Vanauken wrote a book about this entitled *A Severe Mercy*.

Sheldon and his wife, Davy, were very intelligent young people when they met in college in the United States, just before WWII. After that war, Sheldon received a grant for a fellowship at Oxford University in England. He and Davy decided to take it and move to England.

Now Sheldon and Davy were not religious people. Not in the least. In fact they used to say that someday they might give God a look. That was the expression they used. For them their god was their intelligence and their marriage. You see, when they decided to marry, they decided that they would construct a wall, a barrier to protect their love. Nothing and no one would be allowed to penetrate this barrier. Now this might seem perfectly acceptable, but not to the extent that they took this. They did not see God as involved in their marriage in any way. In fact, they thought that religion could be a distraction to their love for each other. One might become more religious than the other and thus cause a division between them. So, their wall would keep God out. Nor would people be allowed to violate the barrier. They would obviously have acquaintances, but close friends, no. Close friends might elicit a different response in each of them. That could violate the wall. Nor would they ever have children. In their minds, children would demand attention from one or other of them, and draw away some of their love for each other. You see, they were really pagan and really selfish. Life was about themselves, selfish. They were only concerned about the here and now and the god they made out of their marriage, pagan. Their wall was really a wall against God and a wall against loving neighbors.

That was their outlook when Sheldon received that fellowship from Oxford. They arrived there knowing no one nor caring to know anyone. They only knew their professors and some members of the faculty. One of these people was C. S. Lewis. C. S. Lewis, as I'm sure know, was far more than the author of the *Chronicles of Narnia* or

his science fiction books. His book, *Mere Christianity*, remains a Christian classic as also so many of his other works. Sheldon and Davy were attracted by Lewis' methods and what he claimed was fundamental to life. They joined in the discussion groups that Lewis led. God worked through C.S. Lewis. Gradually, their wall came down. They realized that they needed God in their marriage. They also recognized their responsibility to others. After a while they began leading discussion groups in their home after dinner. Students came, undergraduates and graduate students. It was at this point that they recognized the tremendous mercy of God. Here they were, people who had pushed him aside, people who in their arrogance had said that someday they would give God another look, and yet, they received the grace to come into His Presence. Realizing this, they would say that they lived under the mercy of God. They felt that their place was certainly at the back of the wedding banquet, just overwhelmed that they would be there. They realized that they didn't find God, God had found them. And then Davy became sick, deathly sick. She passed away. Of course, Sheldon was grief stricken. But through it all he came to the realization that the center of his life had to be God, not the phoney barrier he and Davy had constructed. Her death was itself a Severe Mercy leading him to an even deeper relationship to God.

In their humility, Sheldon and Davy did not consider themselves better or worse than others. They just considered themselves to be people who live under the Mercy of God.

"My child, conduct your affairs with humility," we heard from today's first reading.

Just as Sheldon and Davy were certain that they were only in the Presence of God due to His Mercy, they were not concerned with their spiritual status in relationship to others.

This is how all of us need to embrace our spiritual lives. The polarization of American society has seeped down to a polarization within the Catholic Church. There are some people who are convinced that they are better than others due to the particular liturgies they are attracted to or the groups to which they belong. For example, years ago Marriage Encounter was more prevalent in our diocese than it is now. This was and is a wonderful experience that has helped many marriages. But, sadly, some people made it quite clear that their marriages were better than those of people who had not made an encounter. Similarly, there may be people who think that they are better Catholics than others because they are active in campus ministry, or attracted to the Tridentine Mass. Campus Ministry is wonderful, but those in campus ministry have no right to compare themselves to other Catholics who might not be as active. Nor do those who attend the Latin Mass have a right to think that they are better than those who are not attracted to this type of liturgy. There is no place for spiritual arrogance in the banquet of the Lord. No, for all of us, our position at the wedding banquet, our place at the table, is a matter for God to decide. Our only concern should be thanking God that we are in the banquet in the first place.

We all live under the Mercy of God. It is His Grace that calls us to Him in the way that best fits our unique reflection of His presence.

What then is humility? Humility is recognizing whom we are before God and thanking Him with our lives for giving us His Mercy. Humility is saying and meaning, "Lord Jesus, have mercy on me, a sinner."