

First Presbyterian Church, Birmingham, MI  
Life Lessons from Luke: Humbling  
Rev. Dr. John Judson  
August 28, 2022

Psalm 112; Luke 14:1-14

It was not my finest hour, or so it appeared on the photo. There I was in a friend's basement, standing on a step ladder, another friend holding my belt to steady me, while I was stretching my arm toward the ceiling, with my hand gripping a broom. It looked as if I was leading people into battle. What I was actually doing was holding one end of a disconnected PVC heater air intake pipe so that the plumber could try to extract whatever was inside the pipe clogging it up. The larger setting for this interesting pose was that Cindy and I had gone up north with friends, to visit other friends, over the Labor Day weekend. While we were there, the weather turned cold, and our hosts attempted to turn on the heater, to no avail. They called a plumber who diagnosed the problem as a clog in the air intake to the heater unit, which would prevent the heater from turning on. So, the plumber disconnected the intake in the basement, which I was supporting, while he went outside and, using compressed air, attempted to dislodge the clog. It took several tries, but finally, like a shot out of a canon, a squirrel's nest came shooting out above my head. Only then would the heater turn on.

Clogs...they are the things we hope to avoid but always seem to encounter. We have clogs in our drains; we have clogs in our arteries. We have clogs on expressways, especially when we are in a hurry. And we have clogs in our relationship with God that stop us from being the agents of blessing that Jesus calls upon us to be. What am I talking about? What I want you to do is to imagine with me a large series of PVC pipes. On one end is the Triune God, who is pouring out love and grace into the pipe. On the other end of each of those pipes is us. God then is pouring out the love of Christ into us. The pipe, however, does not terminate with us. It moves out from us and into the world. The intent of the transmission line is that the love of Christ that is poured into us is to flow through us as blessing to neighbors and strangers. We can see how this works in the Psalm we read this morning. The Psalm tells us that those who fear the Lord (which by the way does not mean being afraid of God, but simply means showing reverence to God by doing as God asks, such as keeping God's commandments to love God and neighbor) are blessed and fearless, thus the inflow. And then there is the outflow which is that they are generous and lend; that they are gracious, merciful, righteous that they distribute freely and give to the poor. In other words, when the transmission line of God's love is open, people are blessed.

Unfortunately, those transmission lines often get blocked. They can be blocked by all sorts of things. They can be blocked by fear. They can be blocked by the aftermath of tragic events. They can be blocked by depression and mental illness. But most often they are blocked by a condition shared by almost all human beings, and that is pride. When I say pride, I don't mean simply being proud of our accomplishments; being proud of something for which we have worked hard and have put our God given gifts to work. The pride I am referring to is the kind of pride that on the one hand says, "I am sufficient to myself, and I don't need God's love and grace. I can handle this all by myself." This is what I call the "Tower of Babel Effect" when the people of earth decided they would conquer heaven because they were smarter than God and deserved to rule in God's stead. This kind of pride blocks the inflow of God's love and grace in Jesus Christ. A second type of pride blocks the outflow of God's blessings to the world. This happens when pride says to us, "You are worthy of being loved by God and receiving all God's love and grace. You have earned it. But, beware, those other people out there; those people whose lives are not going as well as yours. They don't deserve what has come to you. So, you have no need to share it. You have no need to pass on what has come to you." Pride then becomes the squirrel's nest in the

transmission line of God's love for the world. The question then presents itself, "how do we unclog the transmission line?" The answer is humility.

In its simplest form, humility is not thinking less about oneself, but thinking about oneself less. In other words, humility is a turning away from self at the center of the universe and allowing oneself to both receive from God and give to others. If we want to see how this works, all we need do is turn to our lessons from Luke where Jesus helps us discover how humility works and the benefits it offers.

We begin with humility seeing the other as worthy of our attention and effort. Jesus is having dinner with a group of religious leaders when he notices a man with excessive bodily swelling, or edema. I need us to think more deeply about this for a minute. Jesus is the focus of everyone else's attention. They have come because he is the great teacher, healer, and exorcist. Jesus could have hogged the limelight. He could have made everything about himself. But instead, he focuses on the one person in crowd who was in need. In the process of healing the man Jesus does not ask for praise or adulation. He doesn't want people telling him how great he is. All he desires is that a person is healed and that his audience understands why healing and wholeness matters. This is humility, a focus on the other and not on self. This focus on the other keeps the transmission line open and leads to the next step in humility.

The second step in humility is acting humble. It is a willingness to take the lowest rather than the highest place. Some people have described being humble as being like water because water always seeks the lowest place. Whether it is water in streams or heading into our basements, water always moves downward. This is the concept behind Jesus' parable of choosing the lower place at a communal meal, rather than the highest place. Jesus says we should choose the lower seat because if we chose the best seat, the host might ask us to vacate that seat for someone worthier than ourselves. Thus, Jesus reminds us that we are to choose the way of the servant. We are to choose to act humbly. This choosing the way of the servant opens the transmission line because one is willing to admit that the other is just as, if not more, important than we are; that others deserve recognition in the same way we believe we do. By taking the lower place then, we pave the way for Jesus' final teaching about humility.

The final teaching of Jesus on humility is about the outflow of God's love and grace to others. The example Jesus offers concerns who we ought to invite over for dinner. The people we are to invite to dinner are not those who can repay us. In other words, our actions of welcome and sharing are not to be about us, about what we can get in the end. These actions of love are not to be transactional. They are to be freely offered acts of grace as surely as God's giving of love and grace are freely given. They are offered because God loves the world and thus, we are to love the world and everyone in it as well. This is a reminder that humility is to bring about the outflow of God's love and grace for the world.

Focusing on others, taking the lower place, and sharing with those in need build humility and contribute to ensuring that the flow of God's love and the blessings that flow from that love are made real in the world. My challenge to you then on this day is this, to ask yourselves, how am I practicing humility that I might receive from God and give to the world, the blessings that God desires I bestow?