



# ST BART'S

A Sermon by  
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## From Pride to Humility, From Hostility to Hospitality

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, August 28, 2016*

*The Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost—Based on Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16; Luke 14:1, 7-14*

For many years, Valerie and I lived in homes with yards and small gardens, and every spring the whole neighborhood was out pruning bushes and trees. It is the annual practice among people who care about growing things. Our own garden groups here at St. Bart's were doing just that this spring in both the front garden on Park Avenue and the inside garden outside of the Cloister. It is a practice that non-gardeners do not understand because the pruning process is not a pretty sight ... those who are unknowing are apt to think the gardeners are destroying their subjects. Valerie and I were especially severe in our springtime cutting. In fact, after I finished with the crepe myrtle every year, Valerie called it a "crepe murdering." She was equally rough on her rose bushes. But come mid-summer, all were sprouting, blooming and flourishing.

This metaphor is an apt description of the function of faith, particularly the texts appointed for this week. Like a good pruning, God comes along and cuts away that which looks good on the surface but will suffocate new growth, and God reduces the distance between our hearts and their roots in God. The two pruning themes in today's texts have to do with pruning away pride so that humility can flourish, and to cutting away hostility so that a new growth of hospitality can shoot forth.

In the Gospel text, Jesus seems to want to cut away pride, and more specifically unruly ambition; or as my grandfather said, "when one becomes too big for one's britches." In Luke's account of a dinner party at the home of a Pharisee, he says that Jesus noticed "how the guests chose the places of honor." Jesus likely saw some guests waiting to be seated, while others elbowed their way to the head table. He noticed that the host's invitation list included only good friends and famous and important people, and so he told a parable about the virtues of choosing the lowest place at the table ... and summarizes with the words, "For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."

Now clearly Luke is not trying to set Jesus up as an etiquette expert or to be the town's "Miss Manners," although his advice might make for some interesting dinner parties. When Jesus tells his host whom to invite—the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind—he's not exactly describing a "power lunch." But be assured that that's what he's talking about—power ... the power of humility. Once again, Jesus is describing life in the Kingdom of God, where status and "place" and roles are reversed, where those most welcome in the kingdom are those least welcome in society; where pride is pruned away, and a new flourishing of humility is planted.

To be sure, this vice of pride that Jesus is talking about is very often seen in our modern western society as a virtue. I've never seen on one of the more elaborate business towers of our major cities the words: "Blessed are the meek and humble." If there is one thing that flourishes on Madison Avenue it is robust ambition. Our culture encourages and rewards ambition without qualification. We are surrounded by a way of life in which betterment is understood as expansion, as acquisition, as position, as fame. Everyone wants more and bigger, to be on top, to be a winner ... whatever those statements might mean.

But this is not new. Adam was thrown out of the garden for this, Lucifer was tossed out of heaven, and the short story of Dr. Faustus was based on this same pruning of pride. John Faustus became impatient with the limitations placed upon him in his study of law, medicine and theology. No matter what he learned in these fields, he found he was always in the service of something greater than himself—of justice, of healing, of God.

He chafed in the service and wanted out: He wanted to be in control, to break out of the limits of this finiteness. So he became adept in magic, by which he thought he could defy the laws of physics, the restrictions of morality and human need of God ... and to use this control for his own pleasure and purposes. In order to bring it off, however, he had to make a pact with the devil which permitted him to act for the next twenty-four years in a godlike way—living without any limits, being in control instead of appealing to God's mercy and grace, and exercising power instead of practicing love, of using pride over humility. But at the end of the twenty-four years came real hell, a total breakdown, a crushing identity crisis, and the loss of all relationships.

For generations this story has been told and retold by poets, playwrights and novelists warning people against abandoning the fruitful and flourishing virtue of humility for the death-dealing vice of pride. But something alarming has happened in our lifetime. While there have always been Faustian characters in every society, now nearly our whole society is permeated with Faustian characteristics. The legend of Faustus, useful for so long in pointing out the folly of a god-defying pride, now is practically unrecognizable. One reason is because I believe we have confused aspiration with unruly ambition. Aspiration, in context, a good and honorable virtue, with its dissatisfaction with mediocrity, and with its striving to offer our best, is not the same as a crude ambition which seeks the betterment of only me. When Jesus looks to prune away a core issue in our life, he is certainly concentrating on this latter problem.

And this leads to the second set of pruning: cultivating hospitality from the posture of humility. All of us know that none of us can be a good host if our minds and hearts are just full of our own ideas, concepts, opinions and convictions. There is no room for another person to even breathe. Harry Emerson Fosdick used to say: "I knew a woman named Edith who was a small country. She was bordered on the south, east, north and west by Edith." Do you know people like that? It's the text from Hebrews, which speaks so eloquently of the faculty of hospitality. The author writes: "Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it."

Now let's be clear: hospitality can come off in our culture as just maintaining cordial manners, providing expected social decorum, and exercising social graces. But it means so much more! The word "hospitality" in Greek literally means "love of strangers." In everyday English it means widening our circles of community. As Henri Nouwen has said, "If there is any concept worth restoring to its original biblical depth and evocative potential, it is the concept and practice of radical hospitality... When the world's hostility is converted into hospitality then fearful strangers can become guests revealing to their hosts the promise they are carrying with them. Then, in fact, the distinction between host and guest proves to be artificial and evaporates in the recognition of a new found beloved community."

But let's also be clear, this transformation from the hostilities in our world to a thorough-going hospitality is not easy. Our society seems to be increasingly full of fearful, defensive, aggressive people anxiously clinging to their place and position, and inclined to look with suspicion on anyone who is attempting to find an extra or new place around the table of blessing. Very often the new arrival is seen not only as a threatening stranger, but also as rival.

A number of years ago when I was serving as the rector of a church in North Carolina, there appeared one Sunday an unruly and unkempt mother and her equally unruly and noisy four children. Week by week they would come with their outside voices and all of their bags of toys and writing utensils and camp out about mid-way back on the pulpit side. We did our best to get through the services. I would see other patient parishioners squirming, wincing and rolling their eyes, but everyone kept up their composure and their genuine welcome and care for this woman and her children. And then without notice, they were gone, not to be seen again. Well, a year later at Easter, the mother came up to me during the coffee reception and said: "Do you remember me ... I'm the one with the noisy children?" "Yes," I said, "I remember you." She said, "I'm back! But I didn't bring my children today. Do you know why? Because I wanted to actually hear the message. You see I've been using my children for all these years so that I wouldn't be able to hear what was going on, because I thought it would change my life. I decided this time that I wanted to hear because I want to change. BUT, she said, the other reason I came back was to thank you and the people of this church for showing us genuine hospitality. You welcomed us when no one would ... when we were outcasts, you took us in. You have no idea what we were facing last year—death, addiction, poverty. I am so grateful to this congregation."

Each of us has concentric circles of relationships. Our closest circle usually includes family and our best friends; next are those who are casual friends, work colleagues, social buddies; the third circle would be distant acquaintances and the general public; the fourth circle is attributed to those we see but do not like; and the last circle are the enemies. The Christian calling and pilgrimage encourages us to widen and deepen our circles: that is, to take steps to improve each circle, by first allowing ourselves to be pruned—from our own pride to humility and to have our hostilities reduced so that newfound hospitality can emerge. In this way, each circle enjoys new growth, even a flourishing of budding and flowering.

From the Eucharistic prayers: "O God, open our eyes to see your hand at work in the world about us. Deliver us from the presumption of coming to this table for solace only, and not for strength, for pardon only and not for renewal. Let the grace of this holy meal make us one body, one spirit in Christ, that we may worthily serve the world in his name." Amen.

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