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4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter, Cycle B  
May 3, 2009  
St. Elizabeth Ann Seton Church, Hastings

Acts 4:8-12    Psalm 118    1John 3:1-2    John 10:11-18

As I was prayerfully preparing for this, my very first Mass homily, I recalled my experience in what I consider my first public speaking event. It was a 4-H County Fair demonstration the summer before 7<sup>th</sup> Grade. My topic was geology. My Dad helped me find the right kind of rocks. My Mom and sister Cathy helped me develop and fine tune the presentation.

Less than 10 people were in the audience that day, only three of whom I remember. Providentially, those same three are also here today. Two of them are easy to guess: My mom and Cathy; it was during a work day so my Dad could not be there. The third was a surprise; just as my 4H demonstration was beginning, she came walking down the hallway: the girl I then knew as Chrissy McCollough, someone who Colin, one of our servers today, knows as his Mom. Chrissy was also in 4H and when she saw her long time classmate on the presentation stand, she decided to stay and watch. To say that Chrissy's unexpected presence led me to feel a bit nervous was an understatement. The talk that was supposed to take fifteen minutes was done in four, as I forgot half of my content, and what I did remember was said at double speed. For a perfectionist boy accustomed to success, the poor presentation was an early opportunity to grow in the virtue of humility.

Humility is not a virtue highly valued in our culture. One of the reasons is that we can have a distorted understanding of humility. For instance, people can think they are humble if they think too lowly of themselves. But it is not true humility to think of yourself as worthless, or to deny that you have special God-given gifts. Humility can also be confused with humiliation. In my opening story, it was the self-recognition that I am not perfect that gave me the opportunity to grow in humility. It was not that I felt embarrassed at how poorly I did that made me humble. In fact, such a feeling of embarrassment is actually evidence of pride.

Having described what humility is not, then what is humility? Humility could be defined as an understanding and acceptance of who we are as human beings, and who God is as our loving creator. Humility recognizes that God created each of us out of love, and that we are placed on Earth, in turn, to love Him and others. A truly humble person recognizes that each of us was created in God's image. We were made good, although, due to original sin, we are imperfect and in need of a Savior. Humility recognizes that God alone is perfect. A humble person recognizes he or she has limits to his or her knowledge, while God knows everything.

If one reads the saints, whether they be saints of love and simplicity like Therese; ones of service like Blessed Mother Teresa; or saints of great spiritual insight and intellect like Augustine, humility is understood to be critical in living a truly Christian life, perhaps the most critical virtue other than love. Furthermore, the opposite of humility, the vice of pride, is widely understood to be the root of sin.

By now you may be wondering, why is he talking about humility? Why is he not talking about the beautiful gospel story of the Good Shepherd? Well, actually, I am. The necessity of humility is implicit in accepting the gospel reading as well as today's second reading. Hastings native Fr. Scott Carl, who is now a professor at the seminary, taught us: if God is the Good Shepherd, then what does that make us? Sheep. If you have been around sheep, you realize that Jesus was not exactly paying us a compliment by implying that we are sheep. Among other characteristics, sheep need guidance. A sheep that wanders off on its own, or seeks shelter from a bad shepherd is likely to be eaten by wolves. And so it is in our lives. If we are humble enough to recognize that we are a sheep, we realize that we need God, the Good Shepherd, to help us in life.

In the second reading, John compares Christians to children. In the time of Jesus, children had a very low social standing. With that in mind, once again, it takes true humility, recognizing who we are in comparison to God, to allow ourselves to be called children. Yet if we do that... If we take that humble step... If we trust God as a loving Father, He will guide us and show us love greater than we can imagine. He wants us to live love-filled and joy-filled lives.

Thus far the description of humility has been abstract; how does one live out real humility in Hastings in 2009?

A first way is by taking the time to pray, to communicate with God, so that we can receive His guidance. This can be done a number of different ways. A good place to begin is at the start of the day... It only takes a few seconds, as one is getting out of bed, to say "Dear God, thank you for the gift of another day. Thank you for my blessings. Help me today."

During the course of the day you may find yourself asking yourself the question "what do I want to do now?" Reframe the question by saying, "God, what should I do now?"

It would be good to set aside 10-15 minutes a day for prayer. This can be done in many different ways. Some examples are: turn off the radio for a few minutes in the car on the way to work. Talk to God as if you were talking to a friend while washing dishes or doing the laundry. Take a few minutes sitting in the LayZBoy, pick up the Bible; starting with the gospels, read a chapter at a time, and then prayerfully think about what you read. Go for a walk and say the rosary.

Here at St. Elizabeth Ann Seton there is a Eucharistic adoration chapel – open 24 hours a day, 7 days a week except during Masses – right there in back. Stop by and quietly visit with Jesus every once and a while, sharing with him your challenges in life, for God wants us to speak to Him from the heart. One can even make a commitment to pray there an hour a week.

At the end of the day, spend a minute or two reflecting back on your day, asking God to show you how you could have done better.

Another aspect of prayer is specifically asking God for guidance in decisions. God wants to help us with questions like: should I look for a new job? Should I ask a girl out? Should I say yes if my boyfriend asks me to marry him? Where should we go on our family vacation this year? How should I discipline my children? Should we buy a new home? If we are humble we realize that what appeals the most to us is not always best for us... and that God, who knows everything, and has perfect judgment, can guide

our decisions better than we can. There is no decision too big, or too little, for God's help.

The second way to act with humility is to recognize that many issues we grapple with in life are not specific to us, but rather, they are common to who we are as human beings. Among other reasons, God inspired the Bible and Jesus established the Church to be the living Good Shepherd on Earth and interpret the Bible in order to guide us in the many decisions we make in life. Sometimes God's commands are easy and pleasing to us. Other times, because we are imperfect, we realize that what we really want is not in keeping with the Bible as more deeply understood through Church teaching. Humility is tested in those moments. A prideful person will dismiss out of hand, what God teaches through the Bible and the Church. In contrast a humble person is willing to be shepherded. Before making a decision on what to do, a humble person seeks to learn: why does the Church teach what She teaches, even if it seems old fashioned. A humble person asks himself: Is there something I am missing? Are my motives imperfect?

Jesus was killed because his message was so radical and challenging of the way of the world. In our second reading, John reminds us that the world did not know Jesus. Anyone who thinks that Jesus' message will be always be easy, or that it will always be what we want to hear, does not understand Christianity. But even if God's way means sacrifices or persevering in difficult circumstances when running away seems the easiest, or forgiving someone who has hurt us, God's way is what is ultimately best for us, what will make us happy, and what will give us true freedom in our lives. We are reminded in today's readings that God is a loving shepherd, who laid down His life for us. He does not want to dominate us. He wants us to be truly happy. He wants us to be truly free... to be truly the person He made us to be. Not to be a slave to our imperfect desires.

And I come to this homily as a personal example of this. For many years I resisted God's persistent calling to be in the place where I am now standing. At the core of my resistance, if I am honest with myself, was that I lacked humility: I thought I knew better than God what would make me happy. And while I had many positive experiences, I also experienced much loneliness, and even when things were going well, there was an abiding emptiness. I was not truly joyful because I was not living the vocation God made me to live. In sharp contrast, even though yesterday I made some incredible commitments that are not on their face very appealing... such as to life-long obedience and celibacy... these past few weeks I have been more joyful than anytime during my life.

The joy that comes with following God's will for our lives is a joy that many of you are already experiencing.

For those who are not experiencing such joy, today's readings offer an opportunity to turn, in humility, to the Good Shepherd, confident that our God is a loving Father and wants the best for us. Ask Him what He wants of you at this time in your life, and have the courage to follow where the Good Shepherd leads you.