

Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost, Year C
The Rev. Ian Burch
St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI
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For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.

When I was making small talk with the landlord of my first apartment in Chicago during my tour, I mentioned that I taught kids music on the side for extra money. He said, “you know, someone just put up a notice on the bulletin board for a nanny — maybe you should apply.” I had never nannied or even worked with small children outside of a thirty-minute, well-controlled music lesson settings, but getting one job quickly is a lot easier than building a studio from nothing, so I decided to apply.

The family was great, and before I knew it, I was the nanny from 2 pm until 6 pm every weekday for three little girls — 4, 8, and 10. I'm not going to lie — it was pretty easy. I'd do the school run, the snacks, the soccer runs, a little homework, light cleaning, and put on the pasta water so they could all eat at 6:10 pm. I enjoyed it, and I got paid cash on Fridays, which made me very popular when it was time to buy a round at the corner bar.

The family was Jewish, and I got a crash course in Jewish piety when I learned all about different religious holidays that happen in the fall — notably Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. These were holidays when all three children would be released from their Jewish Day School while the parents still needed to work. So, I was asked to babysit from 7:15 am until 6:30 pm, instead of my usual four hours in the afternoons.

No problem. More beer money for me. I was there right on time. The girls and I did breakfast clean up; got scrubbed and dressed; watched a little Arthur; went to the playground and then came back. After some rousing Go Fish, yet another snack, and a trip to the neighborhood splash pad, I figured it would be time for lunch. But it wasn't. It was only about 10 minutes after 10. I have never been so simultaneously busy and bored in my life. I looked at their three increasingly ornery faces and did the mental math, quickly figuring out that I couldn't leave for over eight hours. I could feel the day stretching into the distance — filled with crabby kids, sticky fingers, and pleas for more TV time. I wanted to cry a little bit, AND I realized I had to come back the next day for the same thing. I have no idea how people do it.

Standing there in that living room, outnumbered by tiny people like Gulliver and the Lilliputians, I found my humility. I knew that the task required of me was bigger than my ability to complete it with grace. Every great religious tradition talks about humility as a cardinal virtue, but for me, I didn't learn it from sacred texts. Instead, I learned it from a long, boring, morning doing something as quotidian as caring for children.

Humility is not, I think, the same as humiliation. Nor is it obsequiousness, weakness, false modesty, or silence. Instead, I think the humility that Jesus talks about in the Gospel this morning is more akin to awe. In my case, it was the awe related to the enormity of the task of

raising children well compared to what felt like my very limited capacity. It was the awe of these three little souls that had been placed on this earth, and the awe of the responsibility entrusted to me by their parents. Humility isn't a set of behaviors meant to make us look weak. It's a recognition of the massive task placed before us by God, and our willingness to undertake it even knowing our own limits. It is an awe so profound that our response is to drop to our knees.

Jesus continues to instruct the Pharisees in his Gospel: "but when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous."

When we look at the wide range of human suffering, I think a kind of humility can descend — maybe a humility less related to awe and more related to terror. I fear that the suffering of my siblings in Christ will be deadly, or permanent, or unfixable. I fear that we as a nation are too limited or too polarized or too selfish to work for the commonweal. I know that Jesus is asking us to care for the most vulnerable among us, and sometimes that charge feels too big. I feel humbled.

And I think that's okay. Humility is a recognition of the enormity of the task that is in front of us; an awe of the responsibility before us; but it is not at all an invitation to quit. When the mom and dad came home, my kids were safe, clean, washed, and the table was set. I was a few tacks short of a bulletin board by then, and I'm sure I let them eat too much, watch too much TV, and I spoke sharply to them to get them to stop speaking so sharply to one another — always a winning strategy — but I did it. With God's help, I did it.

It's okay to be scared about the enormity of the task that set before us as Christians. It's okay to feel like you want to drop to your knees in awe or in terror. But it's not okay to give up because it is hard or the results aren't exactly what you wanted.

We can work for the care of this world — with humility and with awe. I'm not saying that we will serve this world perfectly, and I'm not saying that we will get this exactly right. But we will offer God and our neighbor our gifts — however imperfect or inadequate they seem — with humility and grace, hoping that God will see our efforts, know our hearts, and continue to work miracles through even us. Humility, in the end, will be our strength. Amen.