

Humility
Rev. Chris Glaser
Virginia Highland Church
November 8, 2009 – Season of Pentecost
Texts: Mark 12:38-44; Psalm 127

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What a proud day it was for Atlanta and for Virginia Highland Church, and yes, for me too. Last Sunday I was a grand marshal of Atlanta's annual pride parade, earning me the world's largest refrigerator magnet! [Held up magnetic car sign reading "Grand Marshal Chris Glaser."] Our church marched directly behind me waving signs for "marriage equality" and our "progressive and inclusive" church. On almost every sign was our proud new logo [Held up one of the signs that said "You are welcome!"], and on one sign was a photo of our beautiful church with its steeple rising into a blue sky. Other signs boasted our recently redesigned website as well as my own. I sat atop the back seat of a vintage convertible, waving a rainbow flag with peace in Latin—"pace"—in its center and waving my free hand to the crowds.

And at the same time, in small town Pittsburg in southeastern Kansas, my Aunt Ann, a widow for a dozen years, was dying in the very home she grew up in—willing herself to go to her Maker because her body was tired, tired and worn and suffering with arthritis, a hematoma, strokes, and a broken pelvis. My family waited to call me till my "moment" was over, late that afternoon as Wade and I strolled the festival. I was to do the eulogy, and I joined my siblings and cousins and Aunt Grace—the last surviving member of my parents' generation—in the quaint college town where my parents had been married seventy years ago this past Thursday by the same Baptist church in which my aunts have been active members.

Of course I took with me the texts for today's service. They are intended as stewardship texts because many churches designate this stewardship Sunday. But we have already had stewardship Sunday, so I see them rather as texts on humility. And, given the circumstances, I could do no other than take them to heart, contrasting in my mind the proud flag and sign waving of Sunday with the humble passing of my much beloved aunt.

Jesus taught, saying, "Beware of religious people who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have the best seats in houses of worship—or on vintage automobiles!—and places of honor at banquets—or at Pride V.I.P. parties!"

And I'm sure that at least some along our parade route would share the same suspicion of us that Jesus had of many religious people of his time: "They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation."

After saying this, our Gospel says, Jesus sat opposite the treasury of the Temple at Jerusalem, watching people put money into the offering plate. Many people were putting in large sums, publicly, so that their generosity might be seen and applauded. Along came a poor widow, who put in two small copper coins worth a penny, and Jesus observed to his disciples, "This poor widow has put in more than all those contributing to the treasury. For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on."

It could be said my Aunt Ann was generous to a fault. As Aunt Grace put it, whenever anyone in the family needed something, she would provide it, whether it was care or money. She often spent her vacations from her job as a phone operator tending to those family members who were sick or hospitalized. She carefully measured and weighed food portions for her diabetic husband all 53 years of their marriage and, despite her sweet tooth, went without herself to encourage him to stick to his regimented diet. And she gave to multiple causes—and so her mailbox would be filled with requests from all kinds of charities. She tried to give to all of them, but her favorites were those that helped veterans, the blind, and animals. "Out of her poverty [she] put in everything she had, all she had to live on."

Now, I'm not so egotistical and my theology is not so misguided as to believe that God was trying to teach me something in the juxtaposition of my grand marshal experience of *Pride* and my dear aunt's death. But I'm also not so stupid and bereft of spiritual insight not to feel humbled by the contrasting experiences. I don't believe God does things to us or to others to teach us, but I do believe God uses all things that happen to us as a teachable moment, if only we have eyes to see, ears to hear, hearts to feel, and minds to learn.

Going to the funeral, I stayed in the town's Super 8 motel, in a room with a view—a view of a liquor store drive-through. It was a smoke-free room that nonetheless had an acrid, smokey smell. The bathroom seemed to have a ghost whose delight was flushing the toilet three to four times a night.

Last time I checked, Pittsburg, Kansas, had about 20,000 residents. It's reminiscent of Bedford Falls in the film *It's a Wonderful Life*. Some of its streets are still paved with bricks, and its main street, Broadway, is reminiscent of all those we've seen in small town America. There are good-hearted souls there. The religious population is largely Roman Catholic or some Protestant variation, mostly Baptist, I think. Whenever I visited, my Aunt Grace would apologize that there was nothing to do there, to which I countered, "But that's what I like about it. I can sit on the front porch and read." My brother and sister and I still own 80 acres of farmland across the border in Missouri, and to Wade's dismay (having escaped from rural Indiana), one of my fantasies has been to build a little house there to do my writing.

But as with anything small, alongside generosity and good-heartedness in this community, there is bitterness and resentment and dysfunction—some of which goes back generations—and, of course, resistance to change. Alongside much good religion, there is also some bad theology. Referencing just-passed Halloween, one church marquis read, "The really scary thing is that there is a hell, and some people are choosing to go there." And the interim pastor of my aunts' small Baptist church used the occasion of his message after my eulogy to declare that only Christians will get into heaven. But thank God, the First Baptist Church of Pittsburg is redeemed by its Kitchen Committee—all older women, many widows themselves—who put on a spread for everyone, Christian or not, that included deviled eggs, meat loaf, green bean casserole, fried chicken, potato salad, mashed potatoes and gravy, brownies, apple and pecan pies, iced tea and fruit punch—and assorted other delights. To me these women provided Holy Communion, a foretaste of the heavenly banquet to which all are welcome.

I cried several times this week, but what made me cry the most was when, driving my rental car, I participated in the cortege that followed the hearse to the cemetery. Now, I sometimes see this in Atlanta, and surely many here have seen this in small towns throughout the South. But what moved me was how cars on either side of the road came to a complete stop until we passed by, some of them turning on their headlights in solidarity, even a tattooed and pierced, long-haired and bearded biker on a Harley. Workers along the street took off their hats and placed them over their hearts. Catholics made the sign of the cross. With no police-on-motorcycles escort, we went through stop signs and red lights and busy intersections without a car or honk interrupting our flow. Witnessing this made me cry. And they were tears of pride, a different kind of pride than I experienced last Sunday. Proud to have my aunt so honored, though anonymously, proud of small town civility, proud of the human spirit that can—in its best moments—show respect to a fellow, fallen human being.

And then came late Thursday afternoon. Awaiting my plane home in the Kansas City airport. CNN on the airport monitors, reporting the shootings at Fort Hood. Such disrespect. Such violence. I could hardly take it in. It was such a jolt to the system, such a contrast to everything else I experienced this week.

As a result of all these experiences, I don't think our Gospel lesson is about stewardship—who gave what and how much or where or when or to whom. It is rather, for me, a lesson in humility. Our psalm today reinforces this notion, "Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain. ... It is in vain that you rise up early and go late to rest, eating the bread of anxious toil; for God gives sleep to God's beloved."

The widow that Jesus observed was not even allowed to be a religious leader, to wear long robes and to say long prayers in public. Her economic disadvantage as a woman and as a widow did not permit displays of wealth. She would never be paraded through the streets, never recognized by her congregation or her community. Perhaps no one but Jesus even took notice of her. But like the lilies of the field and the birds of air, she trusted in God to care for her. And in thanksgiving, she gave all she had. I can't help but think that that was a source of healthy pride for her, a way to lift her own spirits, as she believed her gift might do some good. And, in turn, she lifts our spirits 2000 years later, inspiring us to be gracious and generous in all humility.