Humility Leads us to Grace

Odds are you have heard of the story by Hans Christian Anderson, “The Emperor’s New Clothes.” So caught up himself is the emperor, that all of his money goes to his new clothes. The story begins that he cared about nothing else; from reviewing the soldiers to going to the theater; al that mattered was his vast wardrobe. It takes over his life.

Eventually some shady characters take advantage of him, causing him to believe that he is the only one that can see the fine garment he is wearing. When of course he is naked, no one wants to tell him as he is in a parade, save for a wise child who cries out “he hasn’t got anything on!’ Eventually the whole town comes to see this truth, but the emperor still can’t quite acknowledge the situation, thinking “the procession has to go on,” so, the story ends, “he walked more proudly than ever, as his noblemen held high the train that wasn’t there at all.”

It’s a great story that illustrates how pride can sometimes get in the way of our seeing reality; the reality of ourselves, and of situations we need to address.

Our first reading from Chronicles this week is the story of the destruction of the Temple and the Exile in Babylon, which took place around 600 BC and lasted 70 years. What had happened is the people had fallen into pride. They weren’t faithful to God. The prophets come and they ignore them. With some humility, they could have opened their eyes and seen that yes, they were chosen, yes they were loved by God, but they had not responded to that love appropriately.

The problem is through pride can make us complacent. It can make us judge others and see ourselves as better than them. We can think “hey, I’ve done enough, I’m pretty good, all is well.” Well, all is not well with us. The emperor put on his “best” clothes for the procession and we can put a lot of energy into the outside, but not the inside. Pride is one of those things you rarely hear confessed, but it’s worth thinking about.

The past couple of weeks, I’ve looked at some questions we can ask ourselves as we try to grow in grace during this Lenten season. So here’s a few to think about with respect to pride:

Do I refuse or resist admitting my weaknesses? Do I dwell on the failings of others? Do I judge/condemn others, in my thoughts or words? Do I rank myself better than others or demand certain treatment because of my “status”? Do I harbor hatred for another? Do I refuse to learn from others or reject their opinions, especially when they disagree with me? Am I stubborn? Do I refuse to admit I am wrong or to accept that another person has a better idea? Am I arrogant? Do I hold others in contempt? Do I assume I am right and others are wrong without ensuring I actually understand them or their ideas?

With vanity, Am I overly concerned about what others think of me? Have I allowed this to influence my actions? Do I lie or exaggerate to make myself look good? Have I

wasted undue time and money on clothes and appearance? Am I discontent with my lowly position, or have I resented the role that Christ asks of me? Do I experience frequent anxiety regarding how I am perceived? Do I allow this to influence my actions? Am I cowardly in when confronted with doing or saying something that should be said or done because of my concern for the perception of others? Do I cling to my own perception of myself instead of allowing others to help me understand how I really am?

When I preach at weddings, I often mention to couples that just as “I love you” are important words to say and live out though actions, two very important words as well are “I’m sorry.” A wise couple knows that they make mistakes; they let one another down. Virtually every episode of one of my favorite classic TV series, “The Honeymooners,” was Ralph Kramden played by Jackie Gleason getting into some foolish scheme or getting angry about something and then having to apologize at the end to his loving wife Alice. Pride can so often blind us. But the reality is we make mistakes in our marriages; in our friendships; in trying to live out our vocation if you are a parent or in my case, a priest. I have to be aware that I am a sinner, and a work in progress. On the one hand I need fortitude to make tough decisions, to say challenging things, and to do the right thing. But on the other, sometimes I will fail. When we do, we have recognize we are human and not perfect.

Lastly, two added important words: “help me.” Sometimes we want to do things all on our own. But we live in a community. We are meant to reach out to one another. Also at weddings I remind the couple that the people gathered are not just there for a meal, but there to celebrate with you on your wedding day, but also in the future are there to help you live out your vocation. I turn to other priests for advice; I turn to the great staff we have at our parish to help me in my ministry at Saint Joe’s; and I turn to parishioners to take ownership of their parish as we move forward as a parish family. Odds are your teachers and parents helped you learn how to read and write and ride a bike. Just because we grow in age does not mean we still do not need help along the way. So ask for help, and swallow your pride whether you’re battling a serious sin or an addiction, or just need some advice and counsel or need some help getting a project done. As Christians, we build one another up.

When Adam and Eve eat of the forbidden fruit, they are aware of their nakedness. Like them, sin can make us aware of the sorry state of our lives at times. God though does not abandon them; instead He responds with Jesus, and just as on the Easter Vigil and at every baptism the newly baptized are clothed in a white garment, signifying God’s love and grace, we too are clothed with God’s love every time we approach Him. So let’s not fear doing so, knowing that asking for forgiveness and help is not a sign of weakness, but of strength.