

"PUTTING PEOPLE DOWN"

A Sermon By

Rev. Philip A. C. Clarke

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INTRODUCTION

The English have always seemed to have a knack for the put-down. And two of the best wielders of the cutting remark were George Bernard Shaw and Winston Churchill. They were absolute artists at it.

An example or two. Once Shaw was invited to tea by a woman who was one of those nuisances who likes to collect celebrities and drop their names. She sent Shaw her card with these words, "Lady So-And-So will be at home Thursday between 4 and 6". Shaw returned the card with this notation, "Mr. Bernard Shaw, likewise".

And then there's the famous exchange between Churchill and Lady Astor who said, "Mr. Churchill, if I were your wife I'd poison your tea". Churchill replied, "And Madame, if I were your husband, I'd drink it."

They were the masters, Shaw and Churchill, of the fine art of putting some one down, putting him in his place. So when you have an anecdote that includes them both, it's called a collector's item. It's like a World Series' pitchers' duel, a classic encounter between two super-stars, Gooden and Clemens, and here it is. Shaw sent two tickets for his new play to Churchill with this note. "These are two tickets for the opening night of my play, one for you and one for a friend, if you have one". Churchill sent the tickets back with this note, "I cannot attend the opening night. Send two tickets for the next night, if there is one".

The put down. It can humble the proud and knock the mighty from their seats. I suspect we all have a weakness for the put-down. How often we enjoy pouncing on some unsuspecting prey with the hurtful put-down. Sometimes we'll do it for a laugh. Later on we discover that our putdown has cut and hurt someone deeply. We didn't intend for it to hurt, or did we?

DEVELOPMENT

Why do we do that? Why does insult remain the source of so much humor? Some people - Don Rickles, for instance - make a career out of insulting other people. We pay them to do that and go to listen to them and enjoy it. Why? Let's think more about it.

Perhaps part of the reason is that we are preoccupied with our status in the world. We worry about where we stand or what other people think about us... how we measure up. We never seem to outgrow our anxiety about who we are. We take it with us, wherever we go...always secretly wondering, "how am I doing?" Always worrying about getting ahead of somebody else...always hoping to be acceptable to those people above us and keeping a safe distance from those we consider to be below us.

And it can become an obsession, like Jay Gatsby, staring at the green light, across the bay, on the dock of the rich and the beautiful people, wanting more than anything else to be one of them. It's pitiful what we will do to improve our status, our position in this world...the money we'll spend, the things we'll sacrifice and the people we'll hurt in order to get ahead.

And I wish that I could tell you that in religion it's different, that religion is the answer to this human frailty...but it isn't. We might as well be honest about that. It gallops right along through the field of religion. It affects people in our churches and sometimes prevents us from doing more in the way of kingdom building.

It's called snobbery...status consciousness. Some people will join a particular Church because it's good for their business to be seen there, by the right people. A number of years ago a couple transferred to a sister Church in the neighborhood and a colleague associated with that Church commented to me somewhat sadly on our loss saying that he felt the couple needed that Church more than the Church needed them. There's what we call upward social mobility even in Church life...those who use religion as a means of elevating themselves and putting down others. But that's not the spirit of Christ.

OUR TEXT Let me anchor this down to a text...from the Gospel of Luke. And here Jesus is the guest at a fancy dinner. His host - a ruler and a Pharisee. Now that means that this supper party would probably have been covered by someone from the local paper. It's that kind of party...it had that kind of guest list. The host was a ruler, a prominent man, a Pharisee. He moved in the right circles in that town. He invited some of his friends to come over for dinner to see first hand and up close what this Nazarene was really like. Jesus was getting to be a bit of celebrity by now...famous as a preacher and had some notoriety as a healer, perhaps even a miracle worker. Everybody there at this event had heard of his preaching, but I doubt if any of them had ever heard him preach. But...it was a nice affair...a bit of booze and maybe a barbeque in someone's backyard, catered, candlelight, overlooking the Sea of Galilee.

After the meal - picture this if you can - the host gave a most gracious introduction of Jesus, then asked him to say a few words. And this is what he said,

"I noticed the way you maneuvered for the positions at this dinner. You can get away with that here, but I tell you this, when you are invited to a marriage feast, do not sit down at a place of honor, lest a more eminent person arrives and the host has to come over to you, in front of everybody and say, 'Give your place to this man'. Instead when you are invited, go and sit at the lowest place so that when the host comes, he may say to you, 'Friend, go on up higher'. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled and he who humbles himself will be exalted."

JUDGEMENT PARABLE Now what we have here is another "judgement parable". The opening sentence gives it away. "When you are invited to a marriage feast..." That's the clue. One of the metaphors for the Messiah was "bridegroom", and the kingdom the "marriage feast". So there are parables that Jesus told about bridegrooms and about bride's maids who wait for the bridegroom to come, and about the wedding feast - who's invited, where they sit, who comes and who doesn't. This is one of those Kingdom parables. They all give us a glimpse of the end. It's like fast-forwarding the tape to the end of the movie so you can see how it comes out.

And it says what you think counts now isn't going to count then. All this jockeying for position, this conspicuous consumption, this accumulation of righteousness. None of that's going to count. What's going to count there is humility. Those who take the lowest seats at the banquet, they'll be moved up higher. And those who rush in, confident of their status, demanding the best seats, at the end when the bridegroom comes, they may just be asked kindly to mover over to the table near the kitchen door.

Because nobody knows what's going to heppend in the end. Nobody knows who will be saved. But there's a clue here for us. In fact, this is probably the

best evidence you can find. There is only one thing that you can count on, and that is those who will be first in the kingdom are those who are humble now.

"For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled,
and he who humbles himself will be exalted."

PAUL'S WORD TO US

Philippians, we find:

Turning now to the second scripture passage that Bob read to us, our Epistle Lesson, Paul's Letter to the

"Have this mind among yourself, what you have in Christ Jesus who though He was in the form of God did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a servant."

A bit of background about this passage. The Church at Philippi was having a church fight. People were sniping and snarling, putting down each other, insulting each other, boasting about how they were better than each other and doing a lot of bitching in the process. And Paul's answer to those petty fights was to hold them up to the greatest act in the history of the world, as if to say, Brothers and Sisters, our Lord Christ humbled himself to save the world...why can't you humble yourself enough to end an argument? Christ did not wait for you to come to Him, He came to you, took on your flesh, lived your life, and you sit there smugly, self-righteously, waiting for the one who has offended you to come crawling for forgiveness. Christ humbled Himself as a servant, but you refuse to humble yourself to the likes of these. And being found in human form, He became obedient unto death, even death upon the cross, that you may live. And you won't sacrifice your pride to say the word that will bring new life to the person who is dying to hear it from you.

He came to do away with status and with everything else that gets in the way of our relationship with God and with our neighbor. In fact, wherever He found status separating people, He defied it. He did something outrageous in order to shock people, like forgiving sinners, or hugging outcasts, just so He could hear the clucking of the Pharisees. Because He knew that, in the end, those things don't count. Not in the Kingdom of God, they don't. That's what He came to reveal. Before God we are all alike. So "have this mind in you which you have in Christ Jesus".

Well, dear brothers and sisters, it's easier said than done, which means we still have to work at it. Right? Even here in our Church we are still on our way. We still haven't arrived. We are still tempted to elevate ourselves the easy way, by putting down other people in order to build ourselves up. Like the Philippians, we need help. We may not want to hear it.

CLOSING ILLUSTRATION

And to help myself, I try to remember this. And this is a good one for me because it's an anecdote about preaching, but I think you can identify with it, too. It's an incident out of the life of Harry Emerson Fosdick, one of the greatest preachers America has produced and for many years the great voice of the pulpit of Riverside Church. That Church, incidentally, was built for him by John D. Rockefeller when Fosdick was censured by the Presbyterians. Fosdick preached at Riverside and went across the street to teach preaching to seminarians at Union Theological Seminary which is having its 150th celebration this year.

Now preaching classes are dens of lions. That's where seminarians bare their fangs. I remember my experience in seminary preaching class. You were assigned to a section with eight or ten people in it, and you had to preach three times during the semester to those eight colleagues. After which, they got to criticize your sermon. Well, you take your turn, sign up for a date, prepare the sermon. You're all ready to go...thinking that you have probably written a minor classic. You're even thinking about having it published. And then after you've done it and been torn apart, you come away from the class feeling like changing your vocation. I know I did.

It was the same format at Union. Dr. Fosdick met with every section. Now most professors don't do that. Graduate assistants get the humble job of listening to the stream of mediocre and poor preaching. But Fosdick, one of the greatest princes of the pulpit, emptied himself of his status and met with all of them. He gave of himself to every student. When some poor student finished preaching the sermon, Dr. Fosdick would turn to the others in the section and say, "Now what can we say to Mr. Jones that will be of help to him?"

A GOOD APPROACH

I think it was something of that gracious spirit that Jesus was talking about when He said, "We are to be humble". It's consistent with His example of humbling Himself to be the servant of others, going to them and saying that word that would enable them to find the lives that God had created them to live. "What can we say to somebody that will be helpful to them?"

That's what I try to remember, especially when I am tempted to say something that will call attention to myself at the expense of somebody else. I try to remember I don't need to do that anymore. I know who I am. I am a child of God, for whom Christ died. I'm already somebody by grace. I don't need to prove it anymore. I'm somebody.

But that's not all. Because being somebody is not being Christian. Not yet. According to Philippians, we are not Christians just by receiving what Christ gives us. We become Christians by doing what Christ did for others. He humbled Himself. This is how you do it. You remember in all situations, even when someone else has the spotlight. "What can I say to this person that will be helpful?" I like that line and I commend it to you in place of the put down you may be tempted to offer. Because,

"Whoever exalts himself will be humbled" said Jesus,
"And he who humbles himself, will be exalted...."

PRAYER

Gracious God, Father and Mother of our spirits, in the quietness of these moments we look to You. Teach us in the way of humble service, for we know that it is in dying to our own pride that we are finally born again to Eternal Life. What we know not, teach us. What we are not, make us. For what we have been, forgive us. And as we now are, accept us. We give you thanks for the life you have given us and for the simple gifts which make all the difference, especially for the touch of another person which is felt in a word of kindness, encouragement and perhaps in a deed of love. Guide, guard and direct us toward what You would have us be. Amen.