

COME ON DOWN!

It's been a tough summer for game show aficionados. For one thing, Merv Griffin died. Griffin was one of the most successful television impresarios of our time and the creator of television's most successful game shows: *Jeopardy*, with its answer-question quiz format, and *Wheel of Fortune*, the spelling guessing game with the ageless Vanna White. Griffin did a variety of things, ranging from singing in clubs to hosting a long-running talk show, but his game shows will probably give him his place in popular history.

The other big loss for those who enjoy games shows came about with the retirement of Bob Barker. For thirty-five years the now white haired octogenarian survived the ever-changing whims of television to become one of the most recognizable figures on daytime TV as he hosted the ultimate expression of consumerism, *The Price Is Right*.

No doubt, you've seen it one time or another—perhaps on a day off from work, or when you were home sick from school as a kid—and you know contestants are chosen from the studio audience. The lucky few are then given an opportunity to guess the retail price of everything from boxes of cereal to new cars. And, as each contestant is invited to play the game, *The Price Is Right* announcer, using one of the most famous lines on television shouts, "Come on down!"

Our lesson from Luke appears on the surface, to be just the opposite. For as it tells of wedding banquet seating arrangements its punch line seems to be "Come on up!" But in truth, like the announcement on *The Price Is Right*, the story itself is an invitation to "Come on down!"

Let me explain.

Jesus is having dinner at the home of one of the leaders of the Pharisees. As he sits waiting for the festivities to begin, he notices how people are jockeying for position. Each one tries to sit near the host, in the seats of honor.

So he tells a parable.

When you are invited to a wedding banquet, he says, don't automatically try to sit at the table right next to the bride's parents. If you do, you run the risk of being really embarrassed when the host asks you to move to another spot to make room for a more important guest. Instead, sit in the least desirable place. Take the two-top next to the kitchen door. Or sit

behind a pillar. Then you might be invited to move to a better table, and everyone will see you honored by the host.

“For all,” he says, “who exalt themselves, will be truly humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.” (14:11)

The parable is typical Jesus. It reverses everything, turns it all upside down. Its one more example of the first shall be last, and the last first. It recognizes two basic truths: first, when we set ourselves up as better or more important than others, we often get knocked down a peg. Second, in the long run, certainly God, and sometimes even society, will recognize true humility.

Sometimes we get very confused about humility. Sometimes we think it means acting as if we are nothing but scum.

C. S. Lewis, in his book *Mere Christianity*, writes, “Do not imagine that if you meet a really humble man he will be what most people call ‘humble’ nowadays: he will not be a greasy, smarmy sort of person, who is always telling you that, of course, he is nobody.” (114)

No, being humble simply means recognizing who you truly are. The words humble and humility come from the same root as the word *humus*, Latin for earth. Being humble, having humility, means having your feet firmly planted on the ground, on the earth. It means knowing your own weaknesses, and your own strengths. It means understanding your limitations. It means knowing who you are.

This past week the press has been filled with stories about Mother Theresa, the highly revered nun who spent her life working with the poorest of the poor in India. The news has focused on the recent release of some private letters Theresa wrote in which she discussed some of the inner turmoil she faced in life. In one letter she wrote, “I am told God lives in me—and yet the reality of darkness and coldness and emptiness is so great, that nothing touches my soul.” (www.cnn.archives.com)

Some have been shocked by these letters. But they are, in fact, incredibly human. And the fact that Mother Theresa dealt with these issues makes her work no less real! That she didn’t go about publically flogging herself, despite her doubts and concerns, she refused to get caught up in an “O what a worm I am” sort of image, but rather went about the work God had called her to do. That points not to some failure of her spirit but rather to her great humility. She did not exalt herself, but neither did she publically tear herself down! In one of her books she writes: “If you are humble, nothing will touch you, neither praise nor disgrace, because you know what you are. If you are blamed, you won’t be discouraged; if anyone calls you a saint, you won’t put yourself on a pedestal.” (*No Greater Love*, 55)

The kind of work Mother Theresa engaged in, working among the poorest of the poor, is in many ways very dangerous. Not because of the threat of crime or disease, but rather because of the threat such work brings to our own sense of humility. It is so easy to think ourselves better than a man who is homeless. It is so tempting to feel superior to the woman standing in line at the soup kitchen. But such is not the case.

This past week I received an e-mail from a parishioner looking for some help for a friend. It seems the friend had lost a job, used up all resources, and was homeless. The parishioner's friend is well-educated, and socially connected. "It's hard to believe," wrote the parishioner, "that a person I see regularly is homeless. [My friend] actually had to wait for a bed at the shelter and was sleeping in [a]car." How much harder such a thing is for us to witness! The poor are no longer out there, but right here, in our own town, in our very midst. How can we feel superior? Indeed, the only faithful stance we can take is one of humility—if for no other reason than the poor, near or far, are folks just like you and me. As Mother Theresa writes, "It is too easy to simply talk about the poor who are far away. It is much harder . . . to turn our attention and concern toward the poor who live right next door to us." (94)

Author and Lutheran pastor Mike Foss, tells of how he and his wife came to work each year at their local Salvation Army's Thanksgiving meal. Like our Thanksgiving and Christmas Feasts here at Saugatuck, the Salvation Army meal was open to all.

The first year they helped out, Foss learned an important lesson in humility. They arrived ahead of schedule and helped set tables and lay things out. But when more volunteers showed up than had been expected, Foss and his wife Ellen were asked to work the door as greeters.

Foss writes: "I remember extending my hand, smiling and welcoming the adults who were first to enter. But the men and women would only look at the floor and then . . . move quickly into the dining area."

In time a whole family arrived, and leading the way was a little boy. Foss, who is a very tall man, knelt down to greet the little boy eye-to-eye. The little one flashed him a grin. Then, still kneeling down, Foss looked up at the little boy's Dad. "Extending my hand to the father, I welcomed him as well. And for the first time that morning, an adult looked me in the eye and smiled."

"[F]rom that moment on," Foss writes, "I would bend down lower to make eye contact with those who came in—and invariably they would smile in return. That little boy gave me a wonderful gift that Thanksgiving. I learned that serving is always about looking up at the ones we serve—not down on them." (*The Disciple's Joy*, 84-85)

Being humble—knowing who you are—takes some real effort. It means being willing to come down and make eye contact with those around you. It means making eye contact with yourself! It means making eye contact with God.

Game shows like *The Price Is Right* always have winners and losers. There are always just a lucky few who make it to the final showcase. And most people think life has to work the same way. But that's just not true. For the rules of life weren't invented by Merv Griffin or Bob Barker, but rather, by the God of Love. And God invites us all to be players; God invites us all to win at life. But it will only happen if we are willing to be humble. It will only happen if we are willing to "Come on down!"

Amen

John H. Danner