

**Twenty-Second Sunday in Ordinary Time – Cycle C**  
**Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception – September 1, 2019**  
**Reverend Robert W. Marshall, Jr., Pastor**

Many years ago, when I was practicing law in St. Louis, my colleagues and I were invited to a cocktail party on one of the riverboats before the Monday night football game that was to take place that evening at old Busch Stadium. The mayor, the county executive, business and civic leaders were all there on this festive night. It was quite a gathering for St. Louis. As a first-year associate who had only recently passed the bar, I was easily the least important person in the room. The drawing card was the chance to meet, talk with, and get an autograph from a retired football star – a record holder – a sometimes actor – who was part of the ABC broadcast team that year. I was as excited as the next person to be there and was pleased to receive a personally autographed cap from this celebrity. I never really wore the cap, though, and forgot about it until many years later when this sports star became known for, well, something else. You may have heard of him: O.J. Simpson.

In the aftermath of the Simpson trial, I reflected on that party in St. Louis – how everyone that evening wanted to get close to a celebrity, to get his autograph, to have their picture taken with him. Of course, other than his fame, his Heismann Trophy, and his sports records, we actually knew very little about Mr. Simpson. Yet the fame – and the chance to hob-nob with the city’s “important” people – was enough motivation for us to gather at that party that evening. We thought, I suppose, that by hanging out with the famous and the well-to-do that people would think that we were famous and well-to-do ourselves.

In today’s gospel, Jesus warns us against that kind of social climbing, against inviting to our banquets the important people who will reciprocate with glamorous invitations of their own. Instead, Jesus asks us to invite to dinner those who actually need a good meal – the poor and the sick, those who can do nothing for us in return. Jesus asks us to practice not only charity, but also humility. Now you’re probably thinking to yourselves, well, the next time I actually host a banquet and am tempted to invite society’s movers and shakers, I’ll remember this gospel – but since I haven’t hosted a banquet since – ever – well, I guess I’m off the hook. Not exactly, you see the message of this gospel – the message of humility – goes beyond the proper assembly of our guest list. If there is any virtue that seems to be in short supply in contemporary society, humility may be at the top of the list. Business leaders and politicians tell us to blow our own horn, to network, to advertise our accomplishments. These people seem to view humility

as a vice, not a virtue. It would never occur to them not to seek the most prominent seat, not to exalt themselves – and, unfortunately, it is occurring to fewer and fewer of us. Too many of us are allowing society to mold us rather than accepting the challenge of molding our society through our practice of virtue.

In many cases, the opposite of humility is hypocrisy. Our society may have a short supply of humility, but it seems that we have more than enough hypocrisy to go around. The same people who are so quick to identify the faults and failings of others are the most reluctant to admit them in themselves. No one, for example, admits that they sinned these days. Instead, when caught, politicians and celebrities and others as well – members of our society – never did wrong, they merely made a mistake, committed an error, or were misunderstood. Some people seem to make an entire career of moving from one mistake to another – never accepting any responsibility. Our society perpetuates the hypocrisy that other people sin and that I merely make mistakes. Now, mistakes do happen. A mistake is an error in addition or subtraction. A mistake is oversleeping and missing an appointment. But most of what folks are trying to pass off as mistakes these days – greed, adultery, lying, violent behavior – most of today's mistakes are really sins. Mistakes can and should be excused, but sin requires forgiveness. Yet if one is not humble enough to acknowledge that he has sinned, then how can one possibly be open to receiving the abundant mercy and forgiveness that God offers to us – but does not impose upon us. Practicing humility means acknowledging that God is bigger, more powerful, and more loving than we are – and that we need him. When we are humble, we accept our human limitations, our human weakness, our human sin and we cry out to God for his strength, for his compassion, for his grace. Those who are humble are content to be human for they are confident that God will be God.

Our society – indeed, each and every one of us – needs a strong dose of humility about now. We need to work toward a culture in which saving a political career or social standing is less important than saving our soul. We need to work toward a culture that values celebrity less and integrity more. We need to work toward a culture where the only one exalted is our God. And that work needs to begin in my heart and in yours.