**12 Pentecost 2025**

Robert MacNeil, a pioneer of public media journalism and a driving force behind the show that would become the PBS News Hour, died last year at the age of 93. He and his co-host, Jim Lehrer, who died in 2020, were a true class act and avoided sensationalizing stories like so many current so-called journalists do. In 1976, MacNeil interviewed the renowned pianist, Arthur Rubenstein on his 90th birthday. Here’s a part of the transcript:

McNeil: *Can we talk about your music? When people say, as they do, that you are the greatest pianist of this century, do you believe them?*

Rubinstein: *No, I do not believe them, but I get very angry when I hear that because it is absolute, sheer, horrible nonsense. There isn't such a thing as the greatest pianist of any time of anyone nor anything. Nothing in art can be the best. It is only different. You see, I will tell you my theory about it. I don't think that an artist -- whatever it is, a painter, sculptor, musician, performer, composer, whatever; somebody who has the title of being an artist, of having to do with art -- must have an unconfoundable personality. He must be the one and nobody else.*

That is truth and wisdom with a very generous portion of humility. I fear that old-fashioned humility is out of fashion these days. In politics, sports, business, and other aspects of our culture it’s those who are bombastic, glitzy, slick, and think their better and above everyone else who are rewarded and looked up to as being “successful.” That’s not success. On December 18th, 1777, General Washington and the Revolutionary militia marched to right outside the front doors of this building for the first American Thanksgiving. They had no food to speak of, many were in rags, some with no shoes leaving bloody foot prints in the snow, and they listened all day long to the chaplains preaching to them about how grateful they should be to be part of the endeavor. That took amazing humility to hear and receive, and they marched on to Valley Forge and into the rest of war the next day.

Jesus was, of course, a humble guy. He didn’t have to be. He could have bragged all day long about being God’s Son. He could have lorded it over everyone, and called a few legions of angels down to destroy the Romans and other idolatrous pagans. But that would not have reflected Abba, His Father in heaven. True, he could be outspoken and infuriating, but always with humility. He bent over backwards to love everyone, especially the most unlovable like prostitutes, adulterers, tax collectors and thieves. He was hardest on the religious leaders who paraded around and looked down on commoners. That required true humility.

This morning’s story is one of many in which Jesus turns things on their heads to illustrate his Father’s upside-down kingdom. When you go to a banquet he says, don’t push and shove your way through the crowd to get to the head table. Take a seat somewhere else in the room further back. That will work in your favor in a couple possible ways. If someone more important than you shows up, you could lose your seat up front and be humiliated. Likewise, if the host notices your humility, he may call you up front. Come up higher, friend! Humble yourself in the sight of the Lord, and he shall lift you up. In my Father’s Kingdom, the first shall be last and the last shall be first.

The Franciscan priest Fr. Richard Rohr talks a lot about how the world in every age runs on ego and not on soul. Ego feeds on earthly power and might, us-against-them thinking, intimidation, and war. The human soul has, as Blaise Pascal said, a hole in it that ego can’t fill but only God can fill. When God is invited to fill that space, the soul becomes whole enabling the Holy Spirit to decorate our insides with the gifts and fruits of right living. Things like faith, hope, love, joy, peace, kindness, goodness, self-control and justice to name a few. And, of course, all those attributes are driven by humility, right?

Humility comes from the word “humus,” rich brown earth otherwise known as dirt. Humans are a dirty lot. Someone said we are “mudmen and mudwomen” formed by God out of earth and clay. But remember, notwithstanding hydroponics, fruits and vegetables and everything else need humus or dirt to grow. It’s the same in the spirit realm. When we get in touch with the ground of our being, God, He will grow all kinds of good things in and through us, often in spite of ourselves. That’s upside-down crazy grace and love.

Some of you know that I was gifted with a one-year-old Yamaha GC1 Baby Grand piano, worth about $40,000. Yes, you heard right, gifted. The woman who gave it to me I’ve never met in person. The piano was purchased by her husband who died within a year after buying it. She didn’t want to sell it but wanted to give it away. I heard about it through Mary Jo, our school director, and it will be delivered this week. My banker and others thought it was a scam, but it’s real and a dream come true for this ‘ol piano man. Now, mind you, I did absolutely nothing to deserve it. And that’s the take home. God gifts us with his abundance not because we deserve it, but because he delights to give good gifts to His children. That message is at the heart of our salvation in the Risen Christ.

I’ll never be an Arthur Rubenstein on the piano, but according to his wisdom and humility I don’t have to be—I just have to be me. Same with you with the gifts God has given you. The churches that are growing these days tend to be places that provide entertainment and hype. We don’t do that and we’re not going to. We are who we are and we will be who we will be. And in the spirit realm our humble circumstances are actually very, very powerful. In my mind, make America Great Again should include Make America Humble Again, remembering those soldiers out front on December 18th, 1777, who fought and died for the freedom we enjoy today.

**Amen.**