

## Good Earth

There's a story about a lumberjack convention with a competition to cut down tree trunks. There were ten trees and nine burly contestants. Each contestant was 7 ft. tall, weighed more than a Volkswagen, without an ounce of fat on him. Most of them had more hair in their noses than I do on my head. Their axes were like anvils, the handles like telephone poles. The first stands up to cut his tree down. The whistle blows and chips begin to fly. In a minute and 57 seconds the towering log falls to the ground and the crowd goes wild.

The next stands up and the whistle blows. This time the great trunk falls in a minute and 54 seconds, and the crowd goes wild. The following one tumbles his in a minute and 48 seconds, and the next in a blistering 1 minute 42. So it goes until the second-to-last trunk stands against the sky. The last contestant, the biggest and burliest of them all walks up to the trunk. He looks as tall as the tree he is to fell. The whistle blows, and in just 58 seconds he topples it. The crowd is throwing hats in the air and whistling—it is a new record.

But there is one tree left standing. A little guy who looks to be older than dirt walks up to the judges and speaks to them quietly. He's got one hair curling up from the center of his bald head. His arms and legs look like the other guys would use them as toothpicks. Soon a look of consternation spreads across the judges' faces. He wants a crack at the last pole. They can't really turn him down, so they have him sign waivers of liability so that if he dies in the effort they aren't liable. The little man selects a modest 3 lb. ax. The whistle blows, and a curtain of chips flying off the ax head envelops the small man. Before you know it the tall timber leans and comes thundering to the ground. He has done it in 45 seconds flat! The crowd is totally beside themselves.

When it comes to giving out the prizes all the burly men are looking sheepish. The judges, however, are totally awestruck. "Where in the world did you learn to cut down trees?" they ask the obvious winner.

"Patagonia."

"Patagonia, there aren't any trees in Patagonia."

The man gets a faraway look in his eyes and says, "'Nope, not any more!'"

We love a story about a self-made man, but the side of this I want to pick up on is his simple, humble audacity. Without contention or pretension, without showing off, like Pop Eye the Sailor Man, he just is what he is, nothing more, but certainly nothing less, for when push comes to shove he's a whole lot more than we took him for.

The Gospel lesson today is similar. It's a lesson in humility, not the normal concept of humility we usually picture, you know, the self-effacing one who will not stand up for herself. This is much more along the lines of Anthony Bloom's comments in his book, Beginning to Pray. The word, "humble" is related to the word "humus," or fertile earth. Fertile earth doesn't toot its own horn, it just is what it is. Simply and honestly it gives forth beautiful things.

Jesus gives the disciples a lesson in this. The first section of the story is kind of a setting for things to come. Jesus has just healed a young demon-possessed boy. The disciples were unable to heal him in Jesus' name, and feel bested anyway. Jesus says that this kind of demon only comes out through fasting. Fasting is a way of radical humility, of severing the chords of convention concerning eating, a way of getting in touch with who one is and who one is not. It is a spiritual discipline of getting down to truth.

Now they are walking back, probably to Caesarea, maybe to Simon Peter's home. He tells them he is to die and rise in three days, but this great act of self-giving is lost on them. They are arguing about who is greatest in this new Kingdom Jesus is building! They are still not grounded in truth.

Against this background Jesus does something radical. Apparently there was a little child who broke free of the control of the women in the kitchen and ran out to see what was going on with the men. This was a day when children were seen and not heard, a day when children didn't count for anything at all until they reached adolescence, and then, really, only if they were male children. To have a child run out into the public area where the men were was a social offense. Men were much more important than to worry about the children. To impose their presence was unacceptable.

Jesus seizes the teachable moment. He does not shoo the child back into the world of the women. He takes the child and holds her in his arms. He honors her presence. This is not a value-less child because she has no economic significance yet. This is not a charge of the women until important days to come. This is a child of God, right here, right now. "He who receives a child in my name receives me, and he who receives me receives the one who sent me."

We cannot imagine the social upheaval Jesus pronounces here. Like fasting that cuts through the chords of convention in regard to eating, so Jesus cuts through the chords of convention concerning children. The child is what the child is, nothing more and nothing less, and to be sure, a whole lot more than you took her for! The one who can welcome the non-person as a child of God honors who that person really is: A child of God—nothing more, to be sure, but absolutely nothing less, and probably a whole lot more than you took them for!

So what does that mean for us today? First, who are you?" In the Kingdom it really matters little what station you have in society. Are you powerful? Are you powerless? Do you control means in this world, or do you struggle for your next meal? Does the world tell you, you are worthless

or meaningless, or does it tell you that the moon hangs in the sky because of your magic? The Spirit of God puts little stock in any of that. In the Kingdom that is what you are not.

Who are you, then? You are a child of God, made in the image of God. Thomas Aquinas, one of the greatest western theologians who ever lived, said that the image of God in us consists in our capacity for friendship with God, and if friendship with God, then friendship with one another. Being in relation lies at the heart of divinity and of your own being. The most godly thing about you is your capacity to be in relationship with God and with your neighbor. In the Kingdom you are the child Jesus picks up and honors. The audacity to run away from the place of social convention and to venture into the realm of the presence of God is your birthright!

What does that mean? That means that the one who sees and acknowledges that, the one who receives you in Jesus' name, receives God. You are a potential conduit for people to come to know God. You are not what you are not, but you are what you are, and it's a lot more than what you may have taken yourself for!

Second, who is the one who is invisible in your world? Who is the child that runs into your world and looks up at you, the one who would otherwise have gone unnoticed and unimportant? Who is the one you have been taught to push aside until more important days, the one you have been taught not to give any credence or value to until something essential about them changes, something that will make them worth something in your world? Take a second look. Who are they not? In the Kingdom they are not worthless. In the Kingdom they are not unimportant, invisible or part of the problem. Who are they, then? If you are not careful they will prove to be more than what you took them for, for they are made in the image of God just like you. They are capable of relationships that reflect divine love. They can be for you a conduit to God. The choice does not lie with them, it lies with you. Will you receive them in Jesus' name?

Where do we find these people who the world calls invisible? Where do we find Jesus taking them up in his arms? They are in our families, our church, our neighborhoods and our town, and we as a people can welcome them.

We do already, you know, and I'm proud of you for it:

- The After School Program,
- 6th Street Elementary Project,
- United Campus Ministry,
- Palomas food for the hungry, money for school and an orphanage,
- Just Coffee,
- Honduras Medical Mission,
- Food given to the UCM Distribution Center, the Gospel Mission, and the needy that come by,
- Coats for the Cold,
- My Discretionary Fund that you keep so well stocked,
- The First Saturday Garage Sale,

And there is more. There is every time one of you opens your heart to the image of God in another and receives them as you would receive Christ, Christ is among us once again.

Let us be sure, sisters and brothers, that we do these things in the name of Christ, for when we do we will find that we have received the One who sent Jesus, and we will be received by that self-same One.