

SO LOOK WHO THINKS HE'S NOTHING!

For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted. Lk 14:11

One day during Lent in a small Armenian Church in the village of Gyumri, the Der Hayr stopped in the middle of the morning service, bows low before the altar and cries out, 'Տէր յիշեալ զի ոչինչ եմ, ոչինչ ունիմ, եւ ոչինչ իմիք ձեռնհաս եմ. Remember me, Lord, because I am nothing, I have nothing, and I can do nothing.'

The deacon is so moved by this demonstration of piety that he immediately follows suit. He drops to the floor beside the Der Hayr and cries, "Remember me, Lord, because I am nothing, I have nothing, and I can do nothing!"

In the ensuing silence, a shuffling is heard in the back pew. Poghos Poghosyan jumps from his seat, prostrates himself in the aisle and cries, "Remember me, Lord, because I am nothing, I have nothing, and I can do nothing!"

Seeing this, the deacon nudges the Der Hayr and whispers, "So look who thinks he's nothing!"

I love this joke (originally Jewish, by the way) because it reveals just how deeply seated pride is in our soul, and how difficult it is to be humble. Our prideful ego can even become competitive about being humble. It can even make us look down on a brother or sister in envy, here in church, in the one place we are supposed to be building each other up in God's love.

Pride is enemy number one in the spiritual life. It is the first and deadliest sin we confess. Our assigned Bible readings, and alongside them my sermons, remind us of pride's danger several times a year. Why? Well you could say that pride is basically the opposite of what Jesus calls the two greatest commandments, 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind,' and 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' In our first love for God, pride directly interferes. As C.S. Lewis artfully wrote, 'A proud man is always looking down on things and people and, of course, as long as you are looking down, you cannot see something that is above you.' In our second great love of others, pride also hinders us. 'Pride gets no pleasure out of having something,' Lewis continues, 'only out of having more of it than the next man.'

That was literally the case in our joke, and the joke is on us. These men weren't fighting about something, they were fighting about literally nothing; but only let me be more of nothing than the guy over there. And that of course is the greatest irony, because our ego does leave us with nothing. No matter how much we feed it with praise, accomplishment, wealth or power; it always wants more. "The appetite of my ego always exceeds the grocery store of my soul," writes Craig Lounsbrough. No matter how much we feed it, we are never filled.

Which is why Jesus tells us today that we are all like addicts when it comes to our egos, we can't even feed them a little bit, we just have to try and quit cold turkey. How? You have heard the saying that you have to starve a cold, well today we learn that you also have to starve your ego. The discipline of letting the ego and its desires die is called mortification in old churches like ours, and it is an essential step in spiritual growth. And we don't starve our ego because we are masochistic, but because we trust that God is building up within us something much better than we currently are.

Jesus offers us help in not feeding our ego in today's Gospel reading, and it is no coincidence that his teaching is centered around a feast. Jesus is invited to share the great Sabbath meal at the house of a leading Pharisee, a wealthy and influential man of his time, and everyone is clamoring to sit in places of honor. Everyone is looking to fill up their egos as well as their stomachs, but Jesus has a pointed story to burst the bubbles of the host and his guests.

'You should fight to sit in the cheap seats not in the seats of honor,' Jesus tells the guests, 'for then you won't become full of yourself, you will have room to be filled by God and others.' 'You shouldn't invite your rich and powerful friends to your house,' he tells the host, 'because you too will become full of yourself. Rather, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind, and then you will be blessed, because there will be room for you to be fulfilled by others.' Boiling his teaching down to a one-liner, Jesus, concludes 'For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.'

When it comes to our egos, Jesus' love is tough love, because tough love alone is sharp enough to pierce our pride. The cross alone is love tough enough to mortify our egos, so that new life in Christ can grow. Because our egos will never be satisfied, no matter how much we try to appease it. It will go on comparing, judging and condemning because that is its

nature. This I think is the meaning behind one of Jesus' seemingly harshest statements. "Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life." (Jn 12:25) This isn't about hating life itself which is a gift from God, it is about hating our false self and ego and putting it in its place. Because if we can daily sacrifice this false self; choosing the least honorable seats, welcoming the most down and out, serving in the most humble ways, then we will come to find that our egos which are nothing, might be transformed into something exalted beyond our wildest dreams, now and always; amen.