[**Proverbs 25:6-7**](https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=277#psalm_addl_reading)

[**Psalm 112**](https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=277#psalm_oth_reading)

[**Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16**](https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=277#epistle_reading)**•**

[**Luke 14:1, 7-14**](https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=277#gospel_reading)

**DOING WHAT COMES NATURALLY**

**Sermon for Sept 1, 2019**

**By Rev. Dr. Don Algeo**

**At the gym I go to, there's an older couple – man and wife – who for the last few years have been coming in three times a week, just like I do. That means we find ourselves together in the gym a lot, and we've developed a fairly friendly acquaintanceship, largely because the woman, Kathy, has a very outgoing and friendly personality. She likes to cook oddball things and so do I, so sometimes we swap recipes.**

**The reason they come to the gym is because a few years ago, Kathy's husband, who had been perfectly healthy up to that point, accidentally fell and struck his head on a table. Hitting his head resulted in a severe brain injury, which left him somewhat cognitively impaired and just barely able to walk. Kathy, who was retired but had long worked in senior care, came up with a plan for helping her husband retain and perhaps even augment what little physical capacity he still had.**

**Three times a week, she brings him to the gym, gets him situated on some one or the other of the exercise devices there, and then occupies herself doing something else while he very slowly and laboriously works away on his. She will set the dials and adjust the stress level of the machine for him, and whatever she's doing she constantly keeps one eye on him to make sure he's okay. Sometimes she'll get him on the treadmill, and while he walks on the treadmill, she stands alongside holding the back of his belt with one hand to help him balance, while with her other hand she's holding a book and reading it.**

**But whatever she's doing when she and her husband are in the gym, she's just as chatty as can be, always smiling and laughing, and never giving the slightest suggestion that there's anyplace else in the world she'd rather be or anything else she'd rather be doing.**

**And that's what I'd really like to focus on, not so much what Kathy is doing as the attitude she has in doing it. Never once, by any indication of any kind, does Kathy ever give any indication that what she is doing is anything other than completely ordinary behavior. There's no trace of moral bragging or its even more insidious cousin, moral humble-bragging. There is no single whiff of moral self-congratulation, because there's no single whiff that what she is doing is anything out of the ordinary, anything but mundane, everyday activity.**

**In our gospel reading for today, Jesus advises against taking the best seat at a banquet because you might have to give it up to someone who comes in later. The custom of the time, as it tends to be today as well, is that the most important guests often come in at the last minute, sometimes even a little late, and then claim their places of distinction near the host, or these days, at the head of the table. How embarrassing it would be if you'd taken someone's place at the head of the table, and then have to give it up when the latecomer arrived.**

**We saw exactly the same advice in the proverb we read, so it was certainly a piece of practical, proverbial folk advice with which Christ's audience and Christ himself would have been familiar. But in the proverb, that's all it is: a piece of advice on how to avoid social embarrassment.**

**But the Son of God didn't come to instruct us about social etiquette, so He is clearly putting this bit of proverbial wisdom to some much greater purpose.**

**A few chapters later in Luke's Gospel, Luke again quotes Jesus, this time in the course of teaching his disciples directly about humility:**

[***7***](http://biblehub.com/luke/17-7.htm)***And which of you, having a servant plowing or tending sheep, will say to him when he has come in from the field, ‘Come at once and sit down to eat’? 8 But will he not rather say to him, ‘Prepare something for my supper, and gird yourself and serve me till I have eaten and drunk, and afterward you will eat and drink’?***[***9***](http://biblehub.com/luke/17-9.htm)***Does he thank that servant because he did the things that were commanded***[***[e]***](https://biblehub.com/nkjv/luke/17.htm#footnotes)***him? I think not.***[***10***](http://biblehub.com/luke/17-10.htm)***So likewise you, when you have done all those things which you are commanded, say, ‘We are unprofitable servants. We have done what was our duty to do.’ ” (17: 7-10)***

**The point here is not to teach us something about the way fieldworkers or their employers do or should conduct themselves. Why would the Son of God be concerned with that? What Jesus is pointing out to His disciples is that truly following after Him does not mean carrying some extraordinary burden, does not mean yielding to a hard and thankless taskmaster. What following Jesus really means is becoming enough like Christ that living His life is as natural for us as it is for Him.**

**Jesus makes the same point in many places.**

***9Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me; - he says in Matthew - for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. 30***[***For***](https://biblehub.com/greek/1063.htm)[***My***](https://biblehub.com/greek/1473.htm)[***yoke***](https://biblehub.com/greek/2218.htm)[***is easy***](https://biblehub.com/greek/5543.htm)[***an***](https://biblehub.com/greek/2532.htm)***d***[***My***](https://biblehub.com/greek/1473.htm)[***burden***](https://biblehub.com/greek/5413.htm)[***is***](https://biblehub.com/greek/1510.htm)[***light.”***](https://biblehub.com/greek/1645.htm)**(Matt. 11: 29-30)**

**When I go to Walmart, I often walk by the bank branch at the front of the store. To date, I have never once stepped up to the window, showed the teller a gun, and told her to empty the money from her drawer and give it to me.**

**And so far, at least, after I've walked by the bank. I don't silently congratulate myself for having refrained from robbing it. I don't go home afterwards and tell my wife how I walked right by that bank and didn't even think about the possibility. I don't mention to a friend how I looked over as I walked by the bank and one of the tellers smiled at me, and how that smile was so much more rewarding than any amount of money I might have stolen would have been.**

**I suppose there are people who might do all those things, professional bank robbers, for example, but for me, they're just absurdities. Why? Because for me, and for most of you all – I assume – not robbing banks is simply part of who we are, it's as natural to us as breathing.**

**And there's another good illustration. Except for very unusual situations, we don't pride ourselves on breathing, do we? We don't brag the next day about how well be breathed the day before. We simply breath, in and out, thousands of times a day. It's completely unexceptional, it's routine, so much so that we don't even notice ourselves doing it.**

**Here's the rule of thumb: we don't pride ourselves in the things that are so natural and predictable about ourselves that they are simply part of what we are, of who we are. Things that simply flow from who we are are not candidates for pride, because the possibility of our doing anything else is just absurd. I don't pride myself for breathing, because I'm never even tempted to do anything else. I don't pride myself for not robbing a bank, because there is nothing in me that would tempt me to do so.**

**Let me share with you another little glimpse of Kathy. I was sitting in the small room where we change shoes one day, and through the open door I could see Kathy and her husband talking with the owner of the gym. Kathy was standing a little behind her husband, as always providing him some support. While I was watching, she apparently noticed a tiny piece of lint or fluff or something on her husband's back, so she delicately reached out with her free hand and removed it. And then you know what she did? She looked at the tiny piece of lint in her hand for a second, and then instead of releasing it to fall on the carpet, she tucked it into her pocket.**

**No one else saw her do this, not the husband or the owner, and she obviously didn't know I was watching. God was undoubtedly watching, but I very much doubt Kathy was showing off for God.**

**I think that putting that tiny piece of lint in her pocket rather than letting it drop to the floor for someone else to vacuum up was one of the most Christlike things I've ever witnessed, not because the world was changed by it, but because it was done in a Christlike way. It was an act of charity that flowed from Kathy as naturally as the air flows from her lungs.**

**I'd bet dollars to donuts that, unless you had heard it from this sermon, you would never have known about Kathy calmly reading a book as she stands alongside the treadmill holding up her husband by his trousers. You would never have known about her putting a piece of lint in her pocket. And you never will know about a few other things I could describe, because that's enough to make the point. You would never have known because Kathy would never have told anyone about it, and she would never have told anyone about it because, to her, there was absolutely nothing there to talk about. She was just doing what comes naturally.**

**I'm not going to embarrass anyone here, but I can tell you with complete honesty that I have over the years personally witnessed every single member of this congregation behaving the same way Kathy did. To describe those activities would pretty much defeat their purpose, wouldn't it? since they were done with no fuss, with no effort, and certainly with no publicity. I've told you a couple of things about Kathy instead precisely because she's not a member of this congregation and so she can't be flustered by my talking about her.**

**And that's the ideal Christ is setting before us. Two of the first three beatitudes are directly about humility: blessed are the poor in spirit; blessed are the meek. But true heavenly humility does not consist simply in doing good deeds, even menial good deeds. True Christian humility means being so filled with Christ's spirit that good deeds flow as naturally as breathing, and with as little fanfare.**

**And so our sermon prayer this morning, gracious God, is not only that we be empowered to do good works, but also that we be so constituted as not even to notice that they are good. May our Christian lives become as natural to us as breathing, as everyday as putting on shoes, as enjoyable but unremarkable as reading a good book, or watching a favorite show on television. May all trace of moral pride fade from our self-consciousness and be replaced by the true humility of Christ, in whose name we pray.**