It All Starts with the Dirt

A wealthy CEO who had built his firm from a small family business into a large and very successful international company was getting ready to retire and wanted to personally select his successor. One day he gathered his top junior executives in his office and said, “I’ve decided to choose one of you to succeed me. You’re all well-qualified; but I’m looking for some one who will stand out from the rest. So I’m going to give you a challenge.”

With that, he handed them each a small packet and a pot filled with dirt. He continued, “I’m giving you each a seed. Plant it, water and fertilize it, and make sure that it gets plenty of light. In six months, I want to see what you’ve produced. But be warned: it may not yield what you expect.” With that, he dismissed them.

One of these young executives, Joe, took his seed and the pot filled with soil home. He cared for it meticulously; he watered it carefully and gave it healthy doses of fertilizer and sunlight. After two weeks, he looked for a sprout; but there was nothing there. Undaunted, he continued to nurture it for four, six, eight and twelve weeks. For all of his time and care, however there wasn’t as much as a tiny green shoot in his pot.

Even as he heard his colleagues talking with excitement and anticipation about their magnificent plants and flowers, Joe pressed on. He diligently, even lovingly, continued to water, feed and give light to the seed and soil. As the six-month deadline was nearing, Joe was very anxious. Everybody else was bragging about their flourishing plants and flowers, and all he had to show for his efforts was a pot full of dirt.

Finally, the day of decision came. Everyone gathered in the CEO’s oak-paneled office, where he asked them all to be seated. He looked around the room and said, “All of you…well almost all of you have brought something beautiful.”

Joe slid down in his chair, hoping not to be noticed. But it was too late. “The one exception was Joe,” the CEO continued. “Joe, would you come here?” Joe shuddered. As he came to the front of the room with his empty pot, he could hear murmuring and the sounds of people trying to muffle their laughter.

The CEO said, “Ladies and gentleman, I’d like you to meet our new CEO. Congratulations, Joe!” He then put an arm around Joe, who was speechless. The room was filled with stunned silence. Then the others began to put their heads down, burying them in their beautiful flowers, plants and shrubs.

“Six months ago,” the CEO said, “I gave you all a pot with some soil and a seed to plant, nurture and bring back to me. Two things that I didn’t tell you were: (1) I gave you all seeds of the same houseplant; and (2) those seeds had all been boiled: they were dead and couldn’t grow.

“All of you, except for Joe, have brought in wonderful plants, flowers and shrubs. So some of you bought some different seeds, while others went to the
florist and bought what you presented today. Joe was the only one with the 
humility, courage and honesty to bring me the pot with the seed I had given him.”

As he ushered the other shocked junior executives from the room, the CEO 
added, “In life as in business, it’s important to do the right thing and to follow the 
rules. Sometimes, with the right seed, light, water and fertilizer you’ll see 
something beautiful develop; but sometimes, despite your best efforts, all you’ll 
have to show for it is a pot full of dirt. Remember that you’re the soil: that’s 
where it all starts.”

It all starts with the dirt or ground, in Latin, the humus. That’s the root 
word for humility, which is the primary theme of our scripture readings today. In 
our gospel reading, Jesus uses the illustration of an ambitious and then 
embarrassed guest at a banquet to teach his central lesson: “Those who exalt 
themselves will be humbled; and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”

This was a challenging word to the Pharisee and the other guests who were 
invited to the meal. They lived in a very hierarchical and class-conscious society. 
We’ve all heard the cliché, “You are what you eat.” In Jesus’ world, there was a 
corollary: “You are who you eat with.” In other words, table fellowship was not 
just an opportunity share a meal but also to reinforce social standing and 
relationships. Where you sat said a lot about you and about what your host 
thought of you; and if you didn’t even have a place at the table, well....

There is still a lot of jockeying for position today. Sadly, some people are 
willing to lie, cheat and steal to get the seats they want or think they deserve. 
Students buy term papers online and plagiarize in order to get a grade. Athletes 
use illegal drugs to enhance their performance. As we saw with the recent oil 
spill in the Gulf of Mexico, companies are willing to cut corners on safety and put 
their workers at risk in order to squeeze more profits out of their operations.

Of course, we have to remember that Luke’s gospel, like the others, was 
written primarily to address the church, and our own history amply demonstrates 
that we are not immune to the poison of status-seeking and all of the moral 
compromises and corruption that go with it. Egos can get in the way and cause 
us to lose sight of our common baptism, our common mission, and even Jesus. 
Humility is our antidote. Humus, you see, is also an English word. 
According to Dictionary.com, humus is “the dark organic material in soils, 
produced by the decomposition of vegetable or animal matter and essential to the 
fertility of the earth.” New life comes from death. (Haven’t we heard that before?)

When Jesus told his hosts and his disciples to invite “the poor, the 
crippled, the lame, and the blind” and to forget about status-seeking and quid pro 
quo, he was also inviting them to die to themselves. When Sirach counseled his 
child to, “Humble yourself the more, the greater you are,” he was also counseling 
him to keep his ego in check and to die to himself.

When the author of Hebrews contrasted the relationship of God’s people 
under the Old Covenant—one primarily governed by fear (see, e.g., Ex 20:18-21)—
with the New Covenant of God’s love and grace, he invited them to die to the 
ilusion that they could save themselves and rejoice that God had already given 
them a seat at the table. Paradoxically, sometimes it’s wise to be “as dumb as 
dirt.” That’s where the new life begins. It all starts with the dirt. +