

The Reverend Jon Hauerwas - September 1, 2019

Finding Our Place

In an article in Forbes, Christine Riordan recalls a film entitled, *Trouble With the Curve*. In it, “Clint Eastwood plays a long-time baseball scout for the Atlanta Braves who discovers a high-school hitting sensation. [Eastwood’s character] comes up against a young fellow scout who uses statistics to assess players and doesn’t bother with watching them play. The young scout openly challenges Eastwood’s relevance.”¹

“Eastwood visits the potential draft pick.” But, as a result of the scout’s failing sight, “he listens to the sound of the ball hitting the bat and has his daughter watch how the player grips the bat and how his hands move during a hit. Eastwood’s conclusion is that while the player can hit fastballs, he can’t hit curves.” So he recommends passing on the young phenom.²

“The younger scout, however, demands that the Braves select the youth, based on the data. He wins the battle, and the Braves use the team’s first-round draft pick” to select him. In the end, though, it turns out that [Eastwood’s character] was right,

¹<https://www.google.com/amp/s/www.forbes.com/sites/forbesleadershipforum/2013/01/08/three-ways-overconfidence-can-make-a-fool-of-you/amp/>. Accessed on August 31, 2019.

² Forbes.

and “the hitting prodigy unravels when a talented pitcher varies his throws. *Trouble with the Curve* highlights the problem of overconfidence in decision making, which comes from believing you have more accurate and complete information than you actually do.”³

Examples like these are not limited to Hollywood, of course. Instead, history is punctuated with cautionary tales. In April of 1912, the largest and most luxurious passenger ship ever built began its maiden voyage. Managing director Bruce Ismay and chief designer/builder Thomas Andrews had overseen the creation of a masterpiece. The vessel, known as the Titanic, was deemed unsinkable. It contained sixteen isolated watertight compartments. And as Andrews put it, the ship was its own lifeboat.⁴

Unfortunately, the watertight bulkheads were open at their tops, and when the ship struck an iceberg, several of the bulkheads were breached, filling with water and forcing the bow down. Eventually, each of the compartments flooded, one by one, and the Titanic sank. In their overconfidence, the designers had provided enough lifeboats for just one third of the passengers and crew.⁵

³ Forbes.

⁴ Forbes.

⁵ <https://www.google.com/amp/s/www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-fair-society/201204/lessons-the-titanic%3famp>. Accessed on August 21, 2019.

And in one last example, there is a phenomenon on the battlefield called “victory disease.” In the aftermath of an impressive victory or a series of victories, there is a tendency among leaders and troops for complacency and arrogance to set in. When this happens, future engagements have often ended disastrously for a commander’s forces.⁶

So if the point is that we are to be on our guard against overconfidence, what is our alternative? Well, the Bible teaches us to live in a state of humility with those around us. No matter how talented one is, we are encouraged to listen more and talk less. We note that the humble serve without regard to credit or acclaim. We observe how they treat others as better than ourselves, and we see how easily they let go of any sense of entitlement.

The humble show no interest in boasting about their own personal achievements and accomplishments. They readily acknowledge that grasping for power and control is ultimately fruitless. And they recognize that while we are seeking to be faithful people, we will never be fully formed - not as individuals, not as communities, and not as houses of worship.

⁶https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Victory_disease

Jesus understood these challenges, and how a combination of overconfidence and jockeying for position meant that many would spend their lives lost in the pursuit of earthly honor. Thus, he went straight to the heart of the matter. In the ancient world, “meals were important social ceremonies. People noticed where one ate, with whom one ate, whether one washed before eating, and where one sat to eat.”⁷

“U-shaped tables defined the social order. The closeness of your place to the middle of the U indicated your importance to the host. If you were seated at the ends of the table, your place in the social order was immediately obvious.” At such gatherings, it was easy for Jesus to observe how the guests tried to slide their way into the best seats at the table. And he wasn’t impressed.⁸

Instead, he instructed them, and us, to be humble. To neither expect nor yearn for the best seats available. To recognize that the invitation, itself, is enough. Lest, puffed up with pride and overly confident, we experience a great fall when the host says, “‘Give this person your place,’ and then in disgrace you would start to take the

⁷ Alan Culpepper, *Luke, New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary Volume IX*, ed. Leander Keck (Abingdon Press, 1996), 286.

⁸ Elizabeth F. Caldwell, *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship, Year C, Volume 3*, ed. Joel B. Green (Westminster John Knox Press, 2019), 282.

lowest place.” “For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”

Jesus understood the human condition. And his message to us was about far more than losing face in front of our friends and acquaintances. He wanted us to be filled with the right things. And to be puffed up with confidence, not in what we have done, but with what God can do through us.

For all of his accomplishments, one might have expected astronaut Neil Armstrong to be so puffed up that others could hardly relate to him. But, he had an aversion, perhaps even a lifesaving one, to this critical weakness in others, saying, “Well, I think we tried very hard not to be overconfident, because when you get overconfident, that’s when something snaps up and bites you.”⁹

In humility and trust, we give ourselves in service of God’s purposes. And we ask that God will guide us, not only through the inevitable valleys of life, but through the peaks, as well, until we find our rightful place in the kingdom of God. May it be so, and all thanks be to God. Amen.

⁹ Forbes.