



**SAINT THOMAS CHURCH FIFTH AVENUE**  
**in the City of New York**  
*The Reverend Canon Carl F. Turner, Rector*  
**[www.SaintThomasChurch.org](http://www.SaintThomasChurch.org)**

**Sunday, October 27, 2019**  
*The Twentieth Sunday After Pentecost*

*Choral Eucharist*  
*at 11:00 a.m.*

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A Sermon by  
The Reverend Dr. Patrick S. Cheng, *Theologian in Residence*  
*on*  
Jeremiah 14:7-10; Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18, and Luke 18:9-14  
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### **Annual Appeal Sermon Series: Education and Formation**

Somebody once asked the great conductor Leonard Bernstein what was the hardest instrument to play. Without hesitating, Bernstein answered, “second fiddle.” He explained: “I can get plenty of first violinists. But to find someone who can play the second fiddle with enthusiasm — that’s a problem.” And then he added, “If we have no second fiddle, we have no harmony.”

I suspect that Bernstein’s observation rings true with many of you. In some ways, New York City is the quintessential land of first violinists. We see this not only in the performing arts, but also in hyper-competitive fields like investment banking or law. And, of course, religion is no exception.

In today’s gospel reading from Luke, we hear a parable about a devout individual who has a “first violin” mindset. A learned Pharisee thinks that he is second to none in terms of his religious piety. While he is praying with a despised tax collector in the Temple, the Pharisee says: “God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector.” The Pharisee continues by describing all of the great things that he’s doing for God: “I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.”

By contrast, the hated tax collector — who has probably cheated and extorted many people during the course of his career — is too ashamed to even look up to heaven. Standing far away from the Pharisee, he was beating his breast and saying “God, be merciful to me, a sinner.” Jesus concludes the parable by noting that “this man” — that is, the tax collector — “went down to his home justified rather than the other.” According to Jesus: “All who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.”

Humility. We don’t hear very much about this good old-fashioned virtue nowadays. In a world dominated by social media, it seems like the people who are the *least* humble are the ones who actually get the *most* attention. In fact, we don’t hear very much about virtues in general anymore. That’s actually quite unfortunate because we can learn a lot from the study of virtues.

What is a virtue? The great medieval theologian Thomas Aquinas drew upon Aristotle’s notion of the golden mean — or midpoint — in order to define the virtues. According to Aquinas, a virtue is the golden mean between too much (or excess) on the one hand, and too little (or deficiency) on the other.

Take the virtue of courage, for example. Courage is the golden mean between the excess of foolhardiness on the one hand, and the deficiency of cowardice on the other. Or take the virtue of generosity. Generosity is the golden mean between the excess of being wasteful on the one hand, and the deficiency of being miserly on the other.

The same holds true for the virtue of humility. Humility is the golden mean between the excess of self-denigration on the one hand, and the deficiency of arrogance on the other.

Now some might think that humility is about being excessively self-critical or keeping oneself down. But it's not. Humility is about seeing ourselves as we really are. Humility is about recognizing the fact that we are fallible human beings and that we often do get things wrong. In the words of our Old Testament reading from Jeremiah, our apostasies are many, and we have sinned against the Lord.

But that's OK. The fact is that we are *all* second fiddles in the divine order of things. Only God is the first violin. As each of my clergy colleagues has preached in the past five weeks: God comes first. It's OK to be a second fiddle because God loves us despite our shortcomings.

In fact, God loved us so much that God sent Jesus Christ to humble himself and to empty himself on the cross so that we could be exalted. It is only when we lose sight of this basic fact – that we were created to make harmony *with* God, and not to *be* God – that we start getting into trouble.

That, my friends, is the point of Christian education and formation. Theological education in a parish setting differs fundamentally from education in a college, university, or seminary setting. The goal of theology class is not to see who has all the right answers or who can cram the most facts into his or her head.

Rather, the goal of theology class is to cultivate the virtue of intellectual humility. Yes, we are all significant. Yes, we are all loved by God. But we also need to understand that we are only small fragments of glass in the vast mosaic of two thousand years of Christian theological reflection.

Recently, Oxford University Press published an interesting book called *The New Testament and Intellectual Humility*. According to this work, intellectual humility is defined as the “ownership of [one's] limitations.” That is, intellectual humility can be defined as “self-awareness in relation to the limits of one's knowledge and abilities.”

In my view, an effective Christian education and formation program exposes us to the vast diversity and richness of theological views and perspectives. By doing so, it helps us to recognize that we cannot possibly know everything. We recognize that, from an intellectual perspective, we are more like the humble tax collector than the proud Pharisee.

Put it another way, our parish's adult education and formation program should serve as an incubator for intellectual humility. When we are exposed to the dazzling array of great thinkers in the Christian intellectual tradition – from Augustine to Anselm to Aquinas, from Luther to Calvin to Hooker, from Barth to Niebuhr to Tillich, from Kwok Pui-lan to Sarah Coakley to Fleming Rutledge – we cannot help but be humbled by the glory of God.

We are now in the sixth week of our 2020 Annual Appeal campaign. The focus of this week is Christian education and formation. As your Theologian in Residence, I want to thank you for your support of the educational and formation program at Saint Thomas Church Fifth Avenue.

Your pledges make it possible to have our Sunday morning theology classes, our Tuesday evening short courses, and our fall and spring theology lectures. Your pledges also make it possible to have wonderful guest lecturers like Dr. Christopher Wells and Prof. Julie Faith Parker in the coming year. Finally, your

pledges make it possible for us to offer the Pilgrims' Course I to those who want to be confirmed or received, and the Pilgrims' Course II to those who want to deepen their faith and their love for God, the Church, and our parish.

A little known fact is that many of the greatest theologians never completed their life's work. Thomas Aquinas' *Summa Theologiae* was left unfinished upon his death. So was Richard Hooker's *Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*. And so was Karl Barth's *Church Dogmatics*. Even Augustine of Hippo, in his old age, went back and tried to correct many of his own works in his *Retractiones*.

Before they died, these theologians came to recognize their finitude. They recognized that they were ultimately second fiddles and that God comes first. In the words of today's epistle reading from Second Timothy, they had fought the good fight, they had finished the race, and they had kept the faith. But they also recognized that it was the Lord alone who rescued and saved them.

The last words that Martin Luther wrote before he died were this: "We are beggars; this is true." Even though Luther was the intellectual architect of the Protestant Reformation, he ultimately saw himself as having more in common with the humble tax collector who begged for mercy than with the proud Pharisee who tried to save himself.

God is the first violin. Only God comes first. We are the second fiddles, created to make harmony with God. May God grant us the grace to play the part of second fiddle with enthusiasm and humility.