To paraphrase Jon Bon Jovi (which is, surprisingly, not something I do very often) today’s readings give pride a bad name. Sirach does it quite overtly saying, “The beginning of human pride is to forsake the Lord; the heart has withdrawn from its Maker. For the beginning of pride is sin, and the one who clings to it pours out abominations.” The other three readings tend to take it in a slightly different view by emphasising the ways we should live that are not prideful. For example, Hebrews tells us to do things like remember those in prison and show hospitality to strangers. Jesus in the Gospel tells us to not sit in the place of honor but rather to sit in the lowest place. And all of this raises a question about what is so bad about pride? I mean if you asked people these days what characteristics we should avoid I doubt if pride would rank very highly. We tend to throw the word around rather liberally and often in contexts which make it seem like a good thing – we should be proud to be American as the old song goes or we should take some pride in our appearance or be proud of our high school, place of employment or perhaps college. As John Candy tells Steve Martin after he has criticized the taxi driver Doobie in the film *Planes Trains and Automobiles*, “He's proud of his town. That's a rare thing these days.” I mean if John Candy is for it I want to be very careful when pointing out that pride may not the best of things, but that is what today’s scripture requires, so onward and upward as they say.

First before going any further it is probably best to define what exactly we mean by pride. I think many times when the word pride is used the speaker is often using the term fairly benignly. When we say we are proud of our school or hometown, I think that we are mainly just attempting to say that we really like them and there is something worthwhile about those particular things. And I don’t want to get into a discussion about pride used in this way, rather the discussion I want to have is about the definition that the scriptures are using today. To my mind, the best definition for this in terms of short pithy statements comes from the old cliché that says, “Pride is concerned with who is right whereas humility is concerned with what is right.” Or put slightly differently pride is self or inwardly focused. Things are done or judged based on what they do for me. Extremely prideful people besides being a real pain to be around have another problem. C. S. Lewis writing in Mere Christianity said this, “As long as you are proud you cannot know God. 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.” And so now that we have gotten that out of the way let’s look not at the bad stuff, not at why we should not be prideful but let’s look to the anecdote, the virtue of humility, because that is really where all of today’s readings are going. And besides I have just gotten back from vacation and am tan rested and filled with positive juju, so let’s talk about living our faith in a life affirming and joyful way. And the way to do this, at least based on the advice given in all of our readings today is to keep our focus on the things that are eternal, not the things temporal. And of course this is one of the hardest things because focusing on the things temporal is just so easy.

At the end of John Keats’ poem *Ode to a Grecian Urn* we hear the line, "Beauty is truth, truth beauty,—that is all Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know." I think this should be our guide, that which is eternal is beautiful and beauty it is something that exalts the spirit, it is something that draws us higher and closer to God. In the parable that Jesus tells this morning he says, “When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind.” Such an act would be described as beautiful because it is not about social climbing or making an impression but is rather about treating others as children of God -- showing them the same love and respect that God shows to us without any ulterior motives. It is beautiful because it is doing the will of God.

And here is one thing I want to point out about what Jesus says, I think his parable is meant to be taken as an example of behavior rather than as a specific request. In other words you can’t say, “Well I don’t throw dinner parties so I can skip over this part.” Rather what I think he is pointing out is that doing what is right may be of no benefit to us. Inviting people to a dinner party who cannot invite us back is an example of doing something simply because you want to share in hospitality. Jesus makes this same point in Matthew when he says, “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven.” Put rather crudely there are two ways that we can keep score on this earth. One is the prideful way, where everything’s worth is based on how it enhances us. A dinner party is only worthwhile if it makes us better . The other way to keep score is on God’s terms and in this case the question is not what does it do for us, but rather the question is are we doing things that are in accordance with God’s will and growing God’s kingdom. Our world tends to keep score by looking down and asking what does it do for me or my family or my political party, but God asks us to look up, to see the beauty that is God and help to recreate that here on this earth. It can be by serving one another, loving one another and by simply saying not my will but thine be done.

Let me end with a story that I think illustrates what I am trying to say. On February 23, 1943 the United States Army Transport Dorchester was in the waters off Newfoundland en route to Greenland. It carried approximately 900 men, among those 900 were four chaplains: a Methodist minister, Rev. George L. Fox; a Rabbi Alexander D. Goode; a Roman Catholic priest, Rev. John P. Washington; and Reformed Church in America minister, Rev. Clark V. Poling. At 12:55 AM the Dorchester was hit by three torpedoes from the German U-Boat U-223. The captain gave the order to abandon ship and in less than twenty minutes the ship would sink. It is those twenty minutes on which I want to focus. After the torpedo strike the four chaplains initially spread out among the ship calming the frightened soldiers, tending to the wounded and guiding the disoriented to safety. One witness, Private William B. Bednar, who found himself floating in oil-smeared water surrounded by dead bodies and debris said, “I could hear men crying, pleading, praying,” Bednar recalls. “I could also hear the chaplains preaching courage. Their voices were the only thing that kept me going.” The chaplains then opened a storage locker and began distributing life jackets. When it was seen that there were no more life jackets the four chaplains removed theirs and gave them to four frightened young men. As the ship went down survivors in nearby rafts reported that they could see the chaplains, arms linked and braced against the slanting deck. Their voices could also be heard offering prayers. A survivor John Ladd stated, “It was the finest thing I have seen or hope to see this side of heaven.” There is beauty in selflessness and humility, may we see it and may we show it forth in our lives this day and forevermore.