Our readings today are very much about humility. One of the ways Sirach approaches humility is by telling us to know our limits. He says “what is too sublime for you, seek not; what is beyond your strength, do not search.” Knowing and accepting our limits requires humility. Our pride tells us we can do all sorts of things that we can't. It takes a lot of humility and courage to swallow our pride and acknowledge those limits, especially when we are with our friends. The first time I climbed Mount Hood with my friends, Peter, the guy who had the most experience on the mountain, became ill and we had to stop at the Hog’s Back, which is the last stopping point before tackling the summit. It was very hard for him to admit his weakness and say, “I can't lead you the rest of the way.” There was another guy who was with us, Joe, who will readily admit that he always exceeds his limits and regularly gets himself into trouble because of it. I was with him on a couple of those previous misadventures and I fully expected him to want to push forward on Mount Hood and get himself and other guys into trouble. That day on Hood, though, Joe was the guy who stood up and said, “I know I’ve been really pushing us to make it all the way to the top, but if Pete can’t lead us, I don’t want to go any further and I think we all need to turn around and go back.” Knowing Joe as well as I did, I know how much it cost him to say that. Recognizing and accepting our limits can help us to grow in humility.

There needs to be a little bit of push back against Sirach, though, because sometimes we underestimate what we are capable of. We can stretch those limits and grow, but we need to do it prudently. If you are totally terrified of heights, don’t go out and try to fix that by trying to summit Mount Hood tomorrow. If you’ve never lifted weights, don’t go to the gym and try to bench press three hundred pounds on your first try. Work on it a little bit at a time. Expand your limits, but do it with prudence.

In the Gospel, Jesus teaches us humility by encouraging us to seek the lowest place; whoever humbles himself will be exalted. The best example of this is Jesus himself. I could try to show you this through today’s reading from Hebrews but Saint Paul makes it much more clear in his letter to the Philippians. Paul wrote about Jesus, “Though he was in the form of God he did not deem equality with God something to be grasped out. Rather, he emptied himself and took the form of a slave, being born in the likeness of men. It was thus that he humbled himself, obediently accepting death on a cross. Because of this God highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name above every other name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee must bow and every tongue proclaim, to the glory of God the Father, Jesus Christ is Lord.” We should seek the lowest place rather than the highest place because that is what Jesus himself did.

We have to be careful here, though, because we can become proud of our humility. “Wow...look how humble I am. I always take the worst seat. I always give others the better portion, I never draw attention to myself. Look at me, I am the most humble person in the world.” Oops. It's back to square one.

There is a constant battle within us between humility and pride. Pride is one of the seven deadly sins. Yet how many times do we tell people, especially our children, “I am proud of you”? Are we leading those people into sin by instilling pride in them? Here is the catechism’s definition of pride: “Pride is the capital sin that involves excessive self-esteem and a strong desire to be noticed and honored by others; excessive pride sets one in opposition to God.” Excessive pride. Winning the state championship, getting your Eagle Scout badge, finishing a major project in your house are great achievements. But if doing those things makes you arrogant or puffed up with pride or you go around bragging about how great you are...that’s when pride becomes sinful.

To counteract this tendency, we need to remember that the gifts that allowed us to accomplish these things all came from God. He gave us our abilities...it's up to us to develop them...but the gifts have their origin in God. We also need to remember that most of our accomplishments come with help from other people. Our teammates, our parents, our teachers, and our friends. If you find yourself getting puffed up with pride, remember all the people who helped you along the way and then get down on your knees and thank God for them and for the gifts that he has given to you.

Now for a slight change in direction. This is Labor Day weekend. A secular holiday that has a religious counterpart on May 1st when we celebrate the memorial of Saint Joseph the Worker. When we celebrate Saint Joseph—the husband of Mary and foster father of Jesus—in this way we are celebrating the dignity of human labor. God intended for man to be coworkers with him in creation. In the second creation account in Genesis, God placed man in the garden to till the soil and help the garden to grow. It was the man who named all the animals. We are supposed to be coworkers with God in his work of creation. After the fall, labor became difficult and painful but that wasn’t the way it was supposed to be in the beginning.

How do we celebrate Labor Day? We go camping, go to the beach, have BBQ’s, play or watch sports. We are taking a rest from our labors. Just like God did on the seventh day of creation. God established the sabbath because we need to rest from our labors. More importantly, he set it aside as a day for us to give praise, worship, and thanksgiving to him as a community–community is also found in the second creation account but that’s for another time. God doesn’t need these things...but we do. In Greek, the word eucharist means thanksgiving. If we truly make the Sunday celebration of the Eucharist the high point of our week, this act of thanksgiving will help to counteract excessive pride and the sins that flow from it. Remembering that everything that we are and do comes from God will help us to remain humble.

So, instead of squeezing in Mass whenever it fits into your schedule, schedule your weekend around the Mass. Give yourselves the time you need to prepare for Mass and to pray. Humble yourselves by putting what God wants above what you want.

Whoever humbles himself or herself will be exalted.