

“Walking Humbly with God and Comradely with People”

Luke 18:9–14

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The first time Dana met my family, just after we started dating, the older of my two sisters said a couple things she should have kept to herself, even if they were true. First, she said that if we got married, our kids would be tall and thin, have long legs, and they would be geeks... Second, she said, “If you are going to get serious about being with my brother, there is something you need to know. If he is watching a sport from another planet for the first time, within five minutes he will be cheering for one of the teams and screaming at the officials.”

Well, what’s the point of watching a game if you are not going to cheer and scream? Some of you may not be quite as intense as me, but most of us have loyalties. We cheer for one side and boo the other. And this is the case not only for sports but for stories on the printed page, Kindle, or TV screen as well. We need to know who the good guys or gals are and who the bad ones are. Some stories, like *Game of Thrones* and *The Lord of the Rings*, thrive on this dynamic, allowing the evil characters to prevail for a long time so that we will keep reading or watching long enough to see the evil actors get theirs!

In our reading from Luke, Jesus tells a parable about two men who went up to the temple to pray, and we think we know who the good and bad guys are. The Pharisee is bad. We know this before we get to the punchline because Pharisees are enemies of Jesus. Right? The tax collector, while not exactly good, is not as bad as the Pharisee, and he is among a category of people Jesus often embraces — outsiders who need to be redeemed. So, as I read the text, if I had invited you to boo and cheer at the appropriate places, you would have known what to do.

The problem is this is not how the first audience hears this story. Pharisees are reformers of religious tradition, like Jesus in some ways, good temple folk, leaders like Sunday School teachers and seminary professors. By and large, they are good people, though as we know,

some of them are opposed to Jesus. Reformers do not always agree. Tax collectors, on the other hand, are unequivocally bad. They are middle men between the Roman government and the people, collecting taxes while making a little or not so little profit for themselves.

If they are asked to boo and cheer, Jesus' contemporaries would be as decisive as us, except they would be cheering for the other team. So, when Jesus gets to the punchline and it is the tax collector, not the Pharisee, who goes home justified, all because he makes a foxhole confession to save his soul, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" the people are at least baffled, if not angered. Perhaps this is an early chapter in the story. If they keep reading, the tax collector will get his and the Pharisee will be affirmed. But as we know, that is not the case. This is the end of the story and Jesus has made his point. It is a crazy outcome. What is the message here?

Well, fortunately, as was the case with last week's parable about prayer and justice, Luke informs us why Jesus tells this parable. He tells it to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt. He is speaking directly to people who think too much of themselves and look down on others. He is addressing the ultimate oxymoron – spiritual pride!

Spirituality in any tradition involves a connection to a higher being with the resultant growth in self-awareness. Humility is an inevitable consequence. In Judeo-Christian tradition, we experience a heightened sense of inadequacy as we stand in the presence of the Holy. In Christian faith especially, it is all about grace, the grace we know in Christ. So, how in the world could one become prideful in faith?

It is easier than we might think. We are all tempted at some point. Like the Pharisee in Jesus' parable, we can name other people who are far more sinful than we are, no matter how much grace we receive. We come to church, after all, we know something about the Bible, we try to follow some of Jesus' teachings, at least those that are reasonable, while some of *those people*, well, they are the real sinners.

Even the Apostle Paul, the man who talks about the grace of God in Christ Jesus all the time, seems to venture into pride a little bit in our

reading from 2 Timothy — I have fought the good fight, finished the race, kept the faith; from now on there is reserved for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will give me on that day, and not only to me but also to all who have longed for his appearing.” It may be true, but it is the kind of thing someone else usually says about a person when it comes to faithfulness.

English novelist and playwright Dorothy Sayers once said, “The devilish strategy of Pride is that it attacks us, not in our weakest points, but in our strongest. It is preeminently the sin of the noble mind.” Henry Fairlie, who quotes Sayers in his book *The Seven Deadly Sins Today*, adds, “Not only of the noble, but also of the righteous (p. 43).” Pride is the sin of a righteous mind. How well we know. There is nothing more irritating than prideful righteousness, but there is plenty of it all around us, an abundance of people who have all the right answers, do all the right things, and look down their noses at others deemed to be less righteous. God, I thank you that I am not like those people!

Jesus’ parable highlights the need for humility which the tax collector illustrates in his confession, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!” The intent is not to devalue life and say we are nothing but worms. We are made in the image of God. But we are also imperfect, flawed, prone to wander, to quote a familiar hymn, and thus always in need of grace. We need not wallow in remorse, but we must acknowledge our need. We are called to set aside self-praise *and* self-loathing and rejoice in the grace that is ours.

Scottish composer John Bell wrote a song entitled “Sing Hey for the Carpenter” which points to various things we leave behind as we follow Jesus. “Sing hey for the carpenter leaving his tools! Sing hey for the Pharisees leaving their rules! Sing hey for the fishermen leaving their nets! Sing hey for the people who leave their regrets!” It is not just other paths and sin itself we seek to leave behind when we follow Jesus but our remorse as well as we claim the grace that is ours.

But there is another message in this parable. We are called to get in touch with our need for grace and thus develop appropriate humility, and then, we are called to view others in a different way – not as inferior

to us, nor as superior, but as equal. The Pharisee's problem is not just that he speaks too highly of his own faith and fails to appreciate his need for grace, for God; because of his lack of humility, he also looks down on the tax collector as a sinner.

When Dante encounters the proud in purgatory, they are bent double with the crushing weight of a stone they are forced to carry. As they looked down on others in this life, they can only look down in eternity. C. S. Lewis suggested that pride leads to the same result in this life. Those who look down all the time, he said, will not look up to see God. Our calling is not to look down or up at others, but to look across at them as sisters and brothers, recipients of grace, like us.

In his book *The Struggle to Be Free* pastoral care pioneer Wayne Oates wrote about his struggle to embrace his identity as a beloved child of God. He grew up with profound feelings of inferiority due to poverty and limited education in his family, but when he came to understand God's affirmation of him, this transformed not only his self-view and relationship with God but also his relationship to others. He said:

The Word of God, the Logos, the person of Jesus Christ, was my redemption from feelings of inferiority. From then on I felt it a divine imperative never to think of any human being as inferior to me, nor, at the same time, to think of any human being as superior to me. From then on I began to look *across* at all people. I work at this as my daily discipline; to walk *humbly* with God and *comradely* with people. For all of us are made in the image of God. All of us are bought with the same price of the death of Jesus Christ. All of us who once were 'no people' are now the 'people of God.' (p. 43).

That is our calling — to walk humbly with God and comradely with people — and that is the message of the parable. God claims us in grace and calls us to extend grace to others. As our hymn of devotion says, God gathers us in — the lost and forsaken, the blind and the lame, the rich and the haughty, the proud and the strong, all of us. The least we can do is understand this and extend the same courtesy to others.