

At this point in Luke's Gospel, Jesus is drawing ever closer to Jerusalem and his crucifixion, and so he has been teaching the crowd about faith. This morning Luke clearly identifies the focus of a specific teaching for a group of people "who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt." There is an urgency in this parable bordering on rudeness, but there is also hook in it for you and for me.

The simplicity of this parable can be deceptive. And whoever translated this passage in the New Revised Standard Version may have misunderstand Luke's intent because they glossed over an awkward but vital phrase in the Greek. What we heard was: "...The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus." But that's a sanitized version of what the Greek says.

Watch what happens when you hear the phrase in one of the more accurate but cumbersome renderings: "The Pharisee stood and prayed *toward* himself" or "*with reference* to himself" or this: "The Pharisee stood and prayed *for his own advantage*." Luke's Jesus is making the point that this man is not talking to God but to himself. Both men are praying about themselves, which is not problematic. But in praying *to himself*, the Pharisee has become self-justifying and self-righteous to the point that he despises other people. And nobody, as writer James Baldwin once pointed out, "nobody is more dangerous than he who imagines himself pure in heart, for his purity, by definition, is unassailable¹."

That being said, this story is not about two people who get what they deserve. There is a difference between these two men, but neither of them is a pure villain and neither of them is a pure hero.

The tax collector works for an occupying foreign government. He has chosen to participate in a cruel and corrupt system that extracts from his own people, and shows no sign of changing that choice. The Pharisee, on the other hand, is the embodiment of scriptural literacy and moral piety. He exceeds behavioral expectations. He fasts beyond what Jewish teaching prescribes and he tithes everything, including resources that there was no obligation to tithe.

¹ Baldwin, James. *Collected Essays / Notes of A Native Son / Nobody Knows My Name / The Fire Next Time / No Name in the Street / The Devil Finds Work*. The Library of America: New York, NY, 1998.

Despite his somewhat repellant personality, we can't overlook his loyalty to the codes of his faith. He is a pompous parishioner, but one who faithfully and dependably pays his pledge so that the parish priest can stand up and preach about a tax collector and a Pharisee².

The Pharisee may be a bit puffed up and prickly. But he's not a bad man. He has become overly confident in his religious observance, which has led him to think that his own behavior has made him righteous. He imagines that his religious practices have made him superior to the tax collector.

That dog of a sinner, on the other hand, is standing far off and beating his chest, a gesture more typical of first century Middle Eastern women. Men beat their chests only under extreme duress. People listening as Jesus told this parable would have had trouble imagining anyone more despicable or defiling than this tax collector.

And yet here he stands in the customary posture for Jewish prayer, arms across his chest and eyes cast downward, striking himself on the breast and praying over and over: "God, have mercy on me, a sinner." This is the man whom Jesus says "went down to his home justified rather than the other." This is the man that God brought back into right relationship.

There are differences between these two men, but the most important difference is in their hearts. The Pharisee's practices have hardened into a barrier around his heart separating him from God to the point that he sees other people with contempt. The tax collector's practices have broken his heart open to the point that he has come to God in humility, willing to take a fearless inventory of his life.

The tax collector understands that God, the source of all that exists, is the source of forgiveness, healing and hope. He understands that he is one of God's creations in need of forgiveness, healing and love. He prays for mercy in the hopes that God will grant these.

The Pharisee seems to have lost the plot. His condescending attitude and show of piety tempt us to see this man as an arrogant fool. But before we judge him too quickly, look how easy it is for us to say to ourselves: "God, I thank you that I am not like that Pharisee!" Now, maybe we haven't actually said, "God, I

² Craddock, Fred B. *Luke*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009.

thank you that I am not like [fill in the blank]," but all the free-floating anxiety swirling around us because of the presidential election, the war in Syria, racial stresses or economic injustice make the atmosphere ripe for thinking in terms of "us and them."

If we have embraced anything about Luke's Gospel over the past year, perhaps it is this: Jesus taught us to practice seeing beyond external surfaces with deep regard for each other—to practice seeing that what connects us is larger than what separates us.

You see, the Pharisee is not speaking *falsely*, he is just missing the true nature of his blessing. In some ways, the Pharisee is doing more than the institutional church expects of him, but he is missing one of the church's foundational teachings. He has lost sight of how dependent every single one of us is on God's mercy.

His prayer and worship have become not much more than an exhibit—a *show* of his relationship with God. The love of God has become a possession—something that he has—and he has begun to imagine that others neither have nor deserve what he possesses. He has sealed his heart with self-justification as though the love of God was something that we earn or that we accomplish.

But for Luke's Jesus, prayer and worship are more than *demonstrations* of our relationship, they *are* the relationship. Consequently, the nature of our prayer and worship reveals the nature of the relationship. Beyond a healthy sense of self-worth, the more we are full of *ourselves*, the less room we make for God's grace. Without degrading ourselves, the more we make room for God, the more God's kingdom radiates into this broken world.

The good news for both men in this parable, and for you and me, is that God will never abandon a single one of us. When we exalt ourselves—that is to say, when we place ourselves in God's role—God will *humble* us, God will *not* leave us. God will provide opportunities for us to re-evaluate who and what we are before God.

Humility is God's corrective to self-importance and to self-abasement. Humility is not humiliation, but groundedness in what is real. Genuine humility begins with a realistic perception of God and a realistic and accurate perception of ourselves. And genuine humility allows God to make reversals that restore us

to right relationship. The tax collector's great insight was his recognition of where he fit in God's kosmos, and in relation to God the creator and sustainer of that kosmos. That insight is available to the Pharisee, and to you and me, if we will seek it.

God's gift of humility is the beginning of the mercy that releases us to more deeply see that we need God. To see that our life, our very breathe and all that we have come from God. And to see that our wholeness comes from the loving forgiveness, the healing and the hope that God gives to us when our hearts are open.

Humility is not groveling and cringing before God. Humility is a clear-eyed awareness of the reality around us and within us, both the light and the dark. That's why we bring the gifts of the people to the altar in the Eucharist. We do not call these the "gifts that people bring" for a reason. We use the delightfully ambiguous phrase, "the gifts of the people" because they represent what we bring and *all of who and what we are*, for better or worse, our greatness and our folly.

That moment is our opportunity to practice standing before God aware of our need, trusting that God will return us to right relationship with God and with each other before sending us back to our homes refilled with gratitude and grace. It is God's loving mercy that returns us again and again to the path toward the in-breaking kingdom of heaven, where God forgives, loves and makes us whole.

Works consulted:

Johnson, Luke Timothy, and Daniel J. Harrington. *The Gospel of Luke*. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1991.