

“Lord, it’s Hard to be Humble”
Based on Luke 18: 9-14
by Rev. Meghan Davis
Longview Presbyterian Church—October 24, 2010

Quite a few years ago, I was eating lunch in a work lunchroom. There was an awkward moment when one of my co-workers, Tracy was laughing at another, Vince about something (I don’t remember what). Then a third co-worker, Sara, chided Tracy, saying it was bad manners to laugh at Vince for whatever it was, turning a somewhat awkward moment into a really awkward moment. And I remember thinking that Sara was right, it was kind of rude for Tracy to be laughing as she was. But what I remember most about that incident was how hard it was for me not to speak up and say, “It’s also bad manners to correct other people’s manners.” But I knew I couldn’t because in telling Sara that it’s rude to correct other peoples’ manners, I would be correcting other peoples’ manners. What a frustrating catch 22!

In the same way, this parable, is pretty much unpreachable, at least in it’s most basic, simplest interpretation. It sets a trap. It’s easy to take away from it that we should be humble. We should be as humble as possible. Definitely more humble than that Pharisee. If and when we reach that level of humility, then what? Then we can pray, “Thank you God that I am so humble. Thank you that I’m not self-righteous like some people...” If we interpret the parable to be about humility and not comparing ourselves unfavorably to others, how do you preach on that without pointing out examples of someone’s pride and lack of humility? How do you do it without categorizing people? How do you preach about this parable without falling into the same trap with the Pharisee?

Let’s talk a little bit about the two characters in the parable. The Pharisee and the tax collector. These characters are so common throughout the Gospels that for many, they have become almost stock characters and whom we think we know; but how well do we know them really? Pharisees get a really bad rap in Christian thought. We hear “Pharisee” and automatically assume the worst. The term “Pharisaic” is used for people who are overly religiously legalistic. Many of us may even think of Pharisees as being hypocritical. Jesus’ audience, would have heard the beginning of this parable and would have had no such negative reactions to the Pharisee. Indeed, some or perhaps all of his audience might have been Pharisees themselves. Pharisees were legal purists. They did follow every dot and tittle of the law and by following the law, they were considered righteous. Similarly, Luke’s audience, that is those for whom this Gospel was written, might not have had extremely favorable views of Pharisees, but they would not have assumed the worst. By Luke’s and Jesus’ descriptions of Pharisees throughout the gospel, they were indeed righteous in that they followed the law religiously.

Meanwhile, tax collector might not sound all that bad. Sure, no one likes to pay taxes but roads do need to be built, schools need to be run and armies need to be fed. But, of course, tax collectors had no correlation to modern IRS agents. Tax collectors were more like the mob. Yes, they collected taxes, but they had every right to collect as much money as they could from people. So they used various means of dishonesty and coercion to squeeze every penny they could out of people, particularly the poor. Then they’d hand over to Rome however much they

were obligated to pay and then kept the rest. Add on top of that the fact that the government who was receiving the taxes was the occupying foreign power, and you can see that the tax collector would not have been favorably viewed by anyone in Jesus or Luke's audience.

One commentator suggests that the modern equivalent would be: a pope and a pimp go into St. Peter's to pray... Sounds like the start to a bad joke. But I don't think it's not quite right. After all, there is only one pope at a given time and Pharisees are a whole class of people. Unfortunately, with all the church scandals and the decline of respect given to religious figures these days, I don't know if there is any really good modern equivalent for the Pharisee. And again, I think a member of the mafia would be a more apt correlation for the tax collector, but you get the idea. When these audiences heard "Pharisee" they would assume someone of impeccable religious character and when they heard "tax collector" they would assume the exact opposite.

So the parable begins and the story should be about the virtue of the Pharisee and the sin of the tax collector. After all, the Pharisee isn't *lying*. He says he fasts twice a week—which is more than the one time per week required by the law—and tithes a tenth of his income. In terms of his actions, he actually was righteous in the ways he claims to be. And in his righteousness, the Pharisee categorizes people: either they are righteous like he or unrighteous like the tax collector. And the parable itself tends to set up that dichotomy in a way that might be a stumbling block for most of us. We know we're not perfect (and have a hard time identifying with the Pharisee) but we also know we're not terrible (and thus have a hard time identifying with the tax collector). But we don't have to be Pharisee or tax collector. We all fall somewhere in the spectrum between tax collector and Pharisee. And since both characters are sinners—the tax collector for the obvious reasons and the Pharisee for self-deification—we, too, must be sinners.

So Jesus tells this parable to some who "trusted in themselves". It's an interesting phrase. It seems to indicate that these people, likely Pharisees among them, had more than simply strong self-esteem. They trusted in themselves to be righteous, but we are to trust in God not trust in ourselves or in any other worldly source. And as the parable plays out, we see that there seems to be a connection between this trusting in oneself that one is righteous and regarding others to be beneath and inferior to oneself. There seems to be a connection between thinking overly highly of oneself and assuming one's own good standing with God while assuming the worst of others, forgetting that it is not for us to decide who is righteous and who is unworthy. Rather we are to leave it to God to decide because after all, it is only God who knows. Meanwhile, it's probably best to treat everyone as if they are among the righteous rather than the other way around.

But the Pharisee is at the Temple, "standing by himself, was praying thus, 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. ¹²I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.'" One commentator described the Pharisee's prayer, "Although he properly acknowledges God as the source of his righteousness, he goes on to remind God how fortunate God is to have such a wonderful worshipper."¹

¹ E. Elizabeth Johnson, *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Vol. 4 (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 215.

The Pharisee is so sure of and protective of his own righteousness that he doesn't even want to be near those "lower" people. And indeed, the temple did have different areas for people of different status. The tax collector was probably just barely in the temple, at the gates. And there's a sense in the original Greek which is difficult to translate. As sense not so much of the Pharisee standing apart from everyone else, although that too would have been the case. But also there is a sense of his standing in a way that is somehow oriented toward himself, not to God. Standing in a way that is about himself, not about God. In a way that reflects his own sense of self-righteousness.

I'm reminded of the onslaught of political ads we are being hit by these days. Is it just me, or are there more negative ads than positive? It's like candidates think that it's better to cut down the other candidate than to promote their own qualities. Maybe that's what the Pharisee is doing, pointing out to God all those who are much more sinful than he is in hopes that God won't notice his own.

And it's easy for us to think what a shame it is that this Pharisee is so sure of himself and so sure that he's so much better than the tax collector. But let's be honest, who among us has not felt at least a *bit* self-satisfied on a Sunday morning on our way to church passing the baseball field or Starbucks and thinking, "thank goodness church is such a high priority for me, unlike these people. Thank goodness I'm not like those people lounging around drinking coffee and reading the paper in their pajamas all Sunday morning..." How many of us have smugly considered, "thank goodness I'm not like those judgmental Christians?" "Thank goodness I'm not like those _____ (fill in the blank) Christians?"

And then we move on to the tax collector's prayer. Jesus says that the tax collector, "would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!'" Some of you might recognize this is the source of the prayer known as the Jesus Prayer: Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner." The beating of the chest was a gesture reserved for deep grief. The tax collector asks God for mercy because he understood that he was a sinner (and really, aren't we all?) but also, he understood that redemption comes from God. He understood that it isn't about what righteous deed he does—fasting, tithing, or any other good act—it's about God's mercy.

There seems to be here a clear invitation here to humility. But the risk is false humility or taking pride in humility (another form of false humility). "Oh God, I thank you that I am so humble..." In the parable, it seems to be understood that the tax collector is genuine, but I have to be honest, he does seem a wee bit over the top with the whole chest beating. The challenge for us is to be genuinely humble. And perhaps that is achieved through the humble acts (such as prayer, tithing and service). But along with those humble acts should be a lack of assumption about anyone's righteousness and most importantly, an understanding that we are righteous only through God's mercy.

David Lose, a professor at Luther Seminary notes, that this parable "is not about self-righteousness and humility any more than it is about a pious Pharisee and desperate tax collector. Rather, this parable is about God: God who alone can judge the human heart; God

who determines to justify the ungodly.”² Remember, in terms of his actions, the Pharisee actually is righteous in the ways he claims to be. But his claims to righteousness are based on his own actions. His trust is in his *own* righteousness.

The Pharisee’s sin is and isn’t pride. Or more precisely, his sin is pride but pride is just a symptom of a more serious sin which is a vision of oneself as equal to or above God. When we trust in ourselves, as did the Pharisee, we are not trusting in God. Theologian Karl Barth identifies pride as fundamentally idolatrous because it confuses the Creator and the creation, Giver and gift.³ The key here is to not *try* to be humble. It’s impossible to make yourself humble. The key is to rely on God.

This brings us to justification. Jesus says that the tax collector went down to his home justified rather than the Pharisee. So what is the difference between justification and righteousness? As one pastor explains, “The doctrine of justification asks the question of how we reach a status of righteousness in God’s eyes. The Pharisee trusted in himself for his own righteousness, and the tax collector trusted in God for righteousness.”⁴ Justification is not achieved by anything we do, no matter how great the deed may be. The Pharisee thought he’d be justified for his righteous deeds and made sure to remind God of what those deeds were. The tax collector simply reminded God of just why he was in need of God’s mercy and in the parable, it is the tax collector who is justified.

But here’s another trap: The tax collector doesn’t *earn* his justification by the act of penitence or through his humility, either. Justification comes from God, freely given and there is nothing we can do to earn or achieve or even deserve it. Justification comes by faith—the faith and reliance on God not on self. As David Lose explains, “This parable is therefore preached well only to the degree that each time we try to interpret it we find ourselves, yet again, with nothing to claim but our dependence on God’s mercy. When this happens and we forget if only for a moment our human-constructed divisions and stand before God aware only of our need, then we, too, are justified by the God of Jesus and invited to return to our homes in mercy, grace, and gratitude.”⁵

A few days ago, I was running out to do a quick errand, I grabbed my keys and locked my door behind me. Immediately I realized I’d grabbed the wrong keys and I was locked out of my apartment. After several failed attempts to get back into my apartment, finally, I just had to call and wait for a locksmith. From the moment I realized I had the wrong keys and with each failure, I had a taste of this helplessness. Then, like the Pharisee, I would come up with another deed, another possible action I could take to earn justification (or in this case, entry into my apartment). We are as incapable of earning our justification as I was of getting myself into my apartment.

² David Lose, Luke 18:9-14 Commentary on Gospel <http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx>

³ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/1; ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1956), 358-513.

⁴ Robert Leach, *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Vol. 4 (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 216.

⁵ David Lose, Luke 18:9-14 Commentary on Gospel <http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx>

Remember last week's parable of the widow demanding justice from the unjust judge? In that parable, Jesus assured his audience to trust that God will grant justice. Again, today's parable comes to trust. Not trust in ourselves for being able to attain righteousness through our own good deeds. Not trust in ourselves for being able to identify who is righteous and who is not. But trust in God and God's mercy.