

The 20th Sunday after Pentecost
October 27, 2019
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Trinity Episcopal Church, Bend

Joel 2:23-32
Psalm 65
2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18
Luke 18:9-14

“Two men went up to the temple to pray ...”

It could be the start of a joke. In fact it reminds me of one:

A priest and a deacon stand before the altar, praying. The priest prays, “Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner.” The deacon prays, “Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner.” Then they both hear a voice from the back of the church. They turn to see the sexton, head bowed and beating his breast, saying, “Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner.” The priest turns to the deacon and scoffs, “Look who thinks he’s a sinner!”ⁱ

I hasten to add, this is NOT a scene from “A Day in the Life at Trinity”!

If the joke makes sense, it only makes sense, I think, because of the sense we make of Jesus’s final words of explanation:

“... all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.”

By one definition, humility means being aware of one’s sinfulness and one’s need for God’s mercy. That’s the tax collector this morning, praying, *“God, be merciful to me, a sinner!”* By that view of things, the Pharisee’s self-exaltation, his haughtiness, his *hubris*, is his denial of any sinfulness – or, at best, his lack of awareness of his sinfulness and need for God’s mercy.

And in that scheme of things, the point of Jesus’ parable seems clear: we should be humble and (like the priest and the deacon and the sexton in the joke) confess our sinfulness. That’s the simplest interpretation of the parable and of Jesus’ teaching around it.

But the joke exposes the problem. I’m not exactly sure how we do it; there’s something self-contradictory, it seems to me, about the notion of striving to be humble. And it’s a trap, in any event. The moment we decide to take this all to heart and be humble, we inevitably look down on the Pharisee and pray, “God, we thank you that we are not like other people: hypocrites, overly pious, self-righteous, or even like that Pharisee.” But we look down on the Pharisee at our own peril.ⁱⁱ

If we’re going to avoid that trap, take another look at the Pharisee in Jesus’ parable and know this: everything he says about himself is true. He really is that good a person. Two people go up to the temple to pray, and of the two he’s the one we would expect to see there.

The fact of the matter is he's the one most of us look like, the one we were all taught to aspire to become. We want such people to fill out a visitor card and become members of Trinity: they'll be faithful in attendance on Sundays; they'll be sincere in their personal piety (in the days between); and they'll give a full tithe of all their income – 10% *before* deductions!

The Pharisee's flaw isn't that he's lying about how good – how righteous – he is; it's the moment when, as one commentator puts it, he “stops praying and starts peeking.”ⁱⁱⁱ

He declares that he is not like “this tax collector” ... And still he's telling the truth. In fact, that's his very definition of the word righteousness: “I thank God I am not like other people ...” And again, he's not lying; he's telling his truth. Righteousness, as he defines it, is keeping himself apart from others, being better than others.

Ed Bacon is an Episcopal priest and author (and occasional guest on Oprah Winfrey, as well!). He offers another definition for righteousness, one that serves us better, I think. He says he prefers to translate it as “being aligned.” The Pharisee thinks “he could align himself with the God of love by being unlovingly judgmental, condescending, and separate toward others.”^{iv}

As Jesus tells the parable, his listeners wouldn't have been surprised at a Pharisee who goes to temple to pray. The surprise would have been that the tax collector goes as well. And I wonder if that surprising fact is the whole point for Jesus. The two of them are more alike than either is likely to notice or admit. They both go up to pray. That's how it starts. (And it would have started before then. They both got up that morning and put their robes on, one sleeve at a time.) They both stand alone before God. And they both go back down to their homes in the end.

Ed Bacon tells a story about a mystical experience he says he had when he was five years old. It proved to be a counter-voice to the fundamentalistic religious narrative he was raised in. In his mystical experience, he says, “I was told by the inaudible voice of God that I was the most special beloved creature ever made. AND everyone else was too!” He says, “That's the strongest etching I have in my soul.”^v

His mystical experience reminds me of another, famously shared by Thomas Merton:

In Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all those people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers. It was like waking from a dream of separateness, of spurious self-isolation in a special world, the world of renunciation and supposed holiness. The whole illusion of a separate holy existence is a dream. Not that I question the reality of my vocation, or of my monastic life: but the conception of “separation from the world” that we have in the monastery too easily presents itself as a complete illusion: the illusion that by making vows we become a different species of being, pseudo-angels, “spiritual men,” men of interior life, what have you.

He writes from the perspective of a monk, not a Pharisee. But it's clear that he sees the temptation of a monk to be very much like that of the Pharisee in Jesus' parable. For in his continued reflections, he writes:

This sense of liberation from an illusory difference was such a relief and such a joy to me that I almost laughed out loud. And I suppose my happiness could have taken form in the words: "Thank God, thank God that I *am* like other [people] ..."

It's not what makes us different that defines righteousness for Merton – or for Jesus. No, solidarity with the other is what truly defines righteousness. And rejoicing in our common humanity is the mark of humility that raises us all. As Merton (again) sums it up:

It is a glorious destiny to be a member of the human race, though it is a race dedicated to many absurdities and one which makes many terrible mistakes: yet, with all that, God ... gloried in becoming a member of the human race. A member of the human race!

I have the immense joy of being ... a member of a race in which God ... became incarnate ... now ... I realize what we all are. And if only everybody could realize this! But it cannot be explained. There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun.^{vi}

I take encouragement for Merton's mystical vision: if we see others, if we see ourselves, as God sees us, we are all walking around shining like the sun.

There were two of them who went up to the temple to pray ...

I don't know if you feel any affinity for one or for the other of them. You don't have to be a Pharisee – or a monk! – to imagine that the goal in life is to be better than another person. There are times, for any of us I suspect, when the line gets gray between gratitude and smugness. And you don't have to be a tax collector to imagine that you've failed to live up to the standards declared. I suspect none of us feels we've quite lived the life we were meant to live.

But our righteousness will not ultimately save us. Nor will our failures condemn us in the end. As one preacher sums it all up:

Our Anglicanism, our liberalism, our conservatism, our environmentalism, our vegetarianism, our good works, our acts of piety, our love of puppies will not get us into heaven ...

All are one in Christ Jesus ... Jews. Gentiles. Evangelicals. Anglo-Catholics. Conservatives. Liberals. Nascar fans. Opera lovers. ... My purity, your purity, the Church's purity has nothing to do with it. And for that, we say, thanks be to God.^{vii}

ⁱ John Shea, "Checkmating the King," in *The Spiritual Wisdom of the Gospels for Christian Preachers and Teachers, Year C: The Relentless Widow* (Liturgical Press, Collegeville, Minnesota, 2006), p. 297.

ⁱⁱ A cartoonish take on the trap of thinking the goal in life is to be more humble than the next person:



ⁱⁱⁱ David Ewart @ <https://www.holytextures.com/2010/10/luke-18-9-14-year-c-pentecost-october-23-october-29-proper-25-ordinary-time-30-sermon.html>.

^{iv} Ed Bacon @ <https://day1.org/weekly-broadcast/5da73e126615fb9991000004/ed-bacon-true-humility>.

^v Interview with Ed Bacon @ <https://day1.org/audio/user-audio/5db0fd5b6615fb5539000005.mp3>.

^{vi} Thomas Merton, from *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, included in *A Thomas Merton Reader* (Image Books, Garden City, NY, 1974), pp. 345-346 (modified slightly for masculine pronouns).

^{vii} Joseph Pagano @ <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/library/sermon/modern-day-donatism-and-gospel-pentecost-20-c-october-27-2019>.