

One-Upmanship
Luke 18:9-14
October 28, 2007

Once upon a time there was a man who died and went to heaven. Just as he arrived, he noticed a large crowd gathering, so he asked St. Peter what it was all about.

“Oh,” said St. Peter. “It’s show-and-tell time. People go to tell about memorable experiences in their lives on earth.”

“Great,” said the man. “Do you think I could tell about the time that there was a big flood in our town and I saved some people’s lives?”

“Sure!” said St. Peter. “But remember that Noah will be in the audience.”

The parable in Luke’s gospel this morning is a bit like show-and-tell time, or perhaps “show-off” time. The Pharisee and tax collector both arrive at the Temple for prayer. The Pharisee is a devout man, attentive to the rituals of fasting, tithing, and prayer. There is no critique of his piety and devotion. The Pharisee follows a typical prayer posture, standing looking up to God with his hands raised. He is standing by himself, separating himself from others in order to maintain his purity before God. In fact, the name Pharisee means “separated one,” denoting an aloofness from others.

His prayer concerns himself and is rather audacious: “Oh, God, I thank you that I am not like other people---robbers, crooks, adulterers, or, heaven forbid, like this tax man. I fast twice a week and tithe on all my income” (Eugene Peterson, *The Message*). He gets into trouble when he makes the fatal mistake of comparing himself with others and demeaning them. He forgets that he, too, is created by divine grace, and is no better than any other human being made in God’s image. “Begrudge another person the grace of God and we may lose it ourselves.”¹

Contrast that to the tax collector. A tax collector worked as an agent of the chief toll collector, a Jew who contracted with the Roman occupation to collect indirect taxes such as tolls, tariffs, and customs. They had to pre-pay the taxes to the Romans. They tried to recoup their costs plus additional fees, often resorting to extortion and dishonesty. They were despised by their fellow Jews for their coercive techniques.

Jesus’ praise of the tax collector was shocking to his original audience. But listen to the difference in his prayer. He stands far off, as if distancing himself from God for he does not feel worthy before God. He can’t look up to heaven toward God, but beats his breast, which is a sign of remorse or grief. His body language reflects the language of his prayer:

“God, be merciful to me, a sinner!” He owns his identity as a sinner, someone who is separated from God, neighbor, and his best self. He knows that he is despicable. Unlike the Pharisee who is full of his own achievements, the tax collector, cognizant of his sin, honestly turns to God, knowing that he will only be saved by the grace and mercy of God. Unlike the Pharisee, he does not compare himself to others; he only holds himself to the standard set by God and he knows that he falls short. Jesus responds to this honest confession by giving the tax collector a new identity as one who is justified by God. Jesus proclaims that the tax collector is set right by God, because of his humble self-awareness. The Pharisee who tried to prove himself righteous by his own deeds fell victim to the sin of pride.

The parable is not only a story of prayerful humility in seeking forgiveness from God. It is also a lesson about how we should regard ourselves in relationship to others. As North Americans it is tempting for us to compare ourselves to others who do not seem to lead a godly life or even a life governed by common sense and self-discipline. We may not think that we can save ourselves, but in the American Protestant tradition many have been tempted to feel that they are better in some way than those whose lives are in disarray.

Self-righteousness is one of those stumbling blocks about which we church-going folks need to be cautious. It is easy to become rather impressed with ourselves for all the good works we do, all the money we give, for all the praying and caring we do. When things are going well for us personally, professionally or financially, we can easily conclude that we have earned the good fortune that has come our way. We can fall into comparisons and start looking down on others who are less worthy. We begin to think that we’ve done it all on our own and start to distance ourselves from those whom we think have not done as well for themselves. This, however, is not the way God sees people.

Although we may harshly judge someone else as unworthy, God may offer forgiveness and grace to that person. God sees beyond outward appearances and into the core of our being. Remember that the Pharisees fatal mistake was viewing himself as righteous and regarding others with contempt. His comparisons were unwholesome. A desire to be the best we can be can degenerate into a drive to best the competition. The desire to out-do the other is readily visible in the marketplace as commercial vendors vie for our loyalty. It is evident among sports teams and the drive to beat the competition. It has infected churches that compete for members through splashy forms of worship or church-school programs. We see this

competition in the political arena, where tearing down the opposing candidate is standard fare.

A certain measure of pride in a job well done is justified. We get into trouble when we congratulate ourselves for having the gifts we have instead of getting down on the ground and thanking God for them. The Christian virtue of humility is rooted in the earth. The word is related to the root *humus*, meaning “earth” or “soil.” *Humus* probably comes from the root *humi*, which means “on the ground.” To be humble is to be modest and without pretensions. No matter how accomplished or dedicated we are in life, we need to be humble before God and each other. Life is a gift, not a competition. Even our accomplishments are a gift, because we accomplish nothing alone – we are dependent upon God, the earth, and each other every day of our lives. When we find ourselves looking down on others we need to get down on the ground and start looking up at God, the Giver of Life. From the vantage point of the ground we can’t look down on anyone. From the vantage point of humility, we see that we are part of the human family of tax collectors and sinners, in constant need of God’s mercy. In humility, down on the soft, green earth, we remember our kinship with everyone else.²

Instead of feeling superior to the tax collector, the Pharisee may have found himself set right with his neighbor and with God if his prayer had been more along these lines:

*I thank thee, O God, for all the powers of heart and mind that make me able to fast twice in the week and give tithes of all that I possess. Truly my lot has fallen in a fair place. I can’t begin to know all the pressures on this tax collector here, tempting him to work for the enemy. I do not know the mystery of his heart. Let your compassion surround him. Bring him back to your pathways—and show me my secret fault.*³

Wendy Wright says that “True humility holds together two impossible truths in its firm grasp: that, astonishingly, we are made in the divine image and likeness and that the divine image in us is obscured, wounded, or marred. The truth of our being is revealed in our recognition of that likeness and limitation—both blessed and broken. Humility holds these two truths in tension.”⁴

There is a story in the writings of the desert fathers of the fourth century. Abbot Moses went to a meeting was asked to come to a meeting where a sinful brother would be condemned. Moses arrived carrying an old basket leaking sand. He explains, “My sins are running out behind me, and I do not see them, and today I come to judge the sins of another.”

We are warned against attitudes of superiority. We are cautioned not to presume to know whom God accepts. We are called to walk humbly,

taking our place on the ground, where the only model to whom we compare ourselves is God, fully revealed to us in Jesus Christ. When we make that comparison, we realize how far we have to grow. “All who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.”

¹ Robert K. Gnuse, *Lectionary Homiletics* XVIII:6, Oct/Nov. 2007, p. 28.

² Mary Clark Moschella, *Lectionary Homiletics* XVIII: 6, Oct/Nov. 2007, p. 29.

³ Robert Morris, “Meek as Moses: Humility, Self-Esteem, and the Service of God,” *Weavings*, XV: 3, May/June 2000, p. 41.

⁴ Wendy Wright, *Weavings XVII*, p. 11.

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