

Luke 18:9-14 (NRSV)

The Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector

⁹ He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: ¹⁰“Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. ¹¹ The Pharisee, 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. ¹² I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.’ ¹³ But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’ ¹⁴ I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.”

If I'm Right, Who's Wrong?

A sermon preached at North Prospect Union United Church of Christ, Medford, Massachusetts

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Rev. Dudley C. Rose

Text: *Luke 18:9-14*

This morning's story is perhaps one of the most famous in the Bible. Often called the story of the Pharisee and the Publican, Jesus tells of the Pharisee who was full of himself. The Pharisee gives thanks that he is better than others. He looks over at the tax collector and says, "I'm thankful God, that I'm not like him, a sinner. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income." I am the greatest, and I am so glad. O God, it must be terrible to be like a tax collector, or a thief or an adulterer. O God, I cannot imagine being other than I am, picture perfect, a paragon of virtue.

Now sometimes when we hear Jesus' parables and stories we have a hard time agreeing with him. When we hear the story of Martha and Mary, most of us identify with Martha the hard worker who busies herself serving Jesus, their guest, while Mary sits swooning at his feet. We agree with her that lazy Mary ought to get off her duff. Or what about when we hear the story about the workers in the vineyard. Some workers started early in the morning and worked all day. Others worked just a couple of hours in the afternoon. But when the wages were handed out, those who had worked a couple of hours in the afternoon got paid the same as those who worked all day. We agree with the all-day workers when they cry out that it is unfair.

But our story this morning presents us no such problems. We don't like the self-righteous, arrogant, conceited Pharisee. We don't like people who think they are better than everyone else. And Jesus doesn't either. So in this case we easily agree with the point of Jesus' story.

But we've seen Jesus too many times, haven't we? We've heard too many of Jesus' stories. Can any of us help but feel a little uneasy here? Is this just a straightforward lesson? Don't be a puffed-up egomaniac. Is that all there is?

Well, in a sense, yes. The point of the story is plain. Except that Jesus almost always takes us down a winding path. He almost always takes us deeper into the thicket than we originally see. Even the simplest of his stories carry us into new, interesting and unanticipated spaces.

*** There's an old story. One day a minister, in a frenzy of religious passion, rushed into the sanctuary before the cross, fell to his knees, and started beating his breast, crying, "I'm nobody! I'm nobody!" The associate minister, impressed by this example of spiritual humility, joined the minister on his knees. "I'm nobody! I'm nobody!" Now, the sexton, watching from the corner, couldn't restrain himself, either. He joined the other two on his knees, calling out, "I'm nobody! I'm nobody!" At which point the minister, nudging the associate minister with his

elbow, pointed at the sexton and said, "Look who thinks he's nobody!"¹

Traps await us. For example, we may agree that humility and self-effacement are the way to go. We may agree that they are far better than self-righteousness, better than thinking that we're better than everyone. But as the story suggests, we human beings can brag about the strangest things. We can brag about being nothing. We can point to someone else and say that they aren't anywhere near as nothing as we are. At the end of the day, there's very little difference between bragging about being the best something and bragging about being the best nothing.

In fact, this story that Jesus tells this morning has been used in Christian history to this very end. Michael Harding points out, "We have heard this parable preached where Catholics are the Pharisee and Baptists are the Publican; we have heard it preached as supercessionism, treating the Pharisee's spirituality as [Jewish] 'works-righteousness', but that of the publican as good Christian humility."² As such, the story has been used by denomination against denomination, and perhaps most destructively, as a Christian argument against Judaism. Such mis-readings rip the story from its moorings and turn it into exactly what Jesus meant to preach against. Such mis-readings misuse the Gospel and turn it into a dangerous projectile aimed at others. Counting ourselves as better than our neighbors, whether we are counting money, virtues or humility, is a lethal trap.

*** It turns out, however, that our desire to be right or to be the best comes from a positive impulse. Most of us desperately want to think of ourselves as good people. There underlies us a deep and natural insecurity. Psychologists tell us that feeling as though we are not good enough is an epidemic. In the face of low self-esteem, of feeling badly about ourselves, we look for signs that we are okay. We try to be good people. We try to please others. We try to please God. And if we can't please God by being good, we can try to be the most confessing, self-flagellating sinner around. In the terms of our two stories this morning, we try to be the most superb something or the most superb nothing that we can be. In the end, we find it necessary to compare ourselves with others to see how we're doing. The Pharisee in Jesus' story couldn't describe his goodness except in comparison to others who were not so good. The minister who beat his breast and said he was nothing understood himself to be a better nothing than the sexton. In the final analysis, we seem to need to compare and contrast our goodness and rightness with that of others to make it real.

There's an old Chassidic story that illustrates the point. Two disciples of an old rabbi were arguing about the true path to God. One said that the path was built on effort and energy. "You must give yourself totally and fully with all your effort to follow the way of the Law. To pray, to pay attention, to live rightly. The second disciple disagreed. "It is not effort at all. That is only based on ego. To follow God is pure surrender. To follow the way to God, to awaken, is to let go of all things and live the teaching, "Not my will but thine."

As they could not agree on who was right they went to see the master. He listened as the first

¹This was originally an Chassidic story about a Rabbi, a cantor, and a Custodian. It is told in *Stories of the Spirit, Stories of the Heart*, Christina Feldman and Jack Kornfield, editors.

²http://girardianlectionary.net/year_c/proper25c.htm

disciple praised the path of wholehearted effort and when asked by this disciple, “Is this the true path?” the master said, “You’re right.” The second disciple was quite upset and responded eloquently about the path of surrender and letting go. When he had finished he said, “Is this not the true path?” and the master replied, “You’re right.” A third student who was sitting there said, “But master, they can’t both be right,” and the master smiled and said, “You’re right, too!”³

The two disciples of the master each had important spiritual insights. One understood the value of effort, the other the value of surrender. But even as insightful as they were, they were each so insecure that they could not believe they were right unless the other was judged to be wrong. The third disciple captured the dilemma when he opined, “But master, they can’t both be right.” The master acknowledged that it was true that they couldn’t both be right, but that was a trick answer. What the master saw was that in the way of thinking of his disciples, the only way to be right was for others to be wrong. So, the master was commenting on the framework of his disciples. As long as they thought the way they did, someone would have to be wrong if someone was to be right.

Ironically, the master knew it didn’t have to be that way. The master knew that both insights were valuable. He knew that effort and surrender were both right. Either path, or some combination, were good paths. It was not one or the other.

So, the first problem with the idea that someone has to be wrong if I’m going to be right is that lots of times it simply is not true. The world doesn’t always break down into true and false. Truth comes in shades. It is often paradoxical. Truth is much more interesting and textured than simple binaries: yes and no, right and wrong. If we think of the claims of religious truth in the world today, there could hardly be a more dangerous situation. In many quarters my truth almost by necessity condemns your truth to annihilation or to the fires of hell. Good friends, truth is expansive and beautiful than this, but our attempts to own it and narrow it turn truth ugly indeed. In the terms of Jesus’ story this morning, there is more than enough room in the synagogue for prayers of thanksgiving and prayers of confession. Too often our truth is too small; too often our God is too small.

There is, however, a more basic, if not more dangerous flaw in our self-righteous comparisons with others.

In 1932, months before Adolf Hitler’s full ascendancy to power in Germany, Dietrich Bonhoeffer preached a sermon on a text from the Gospel of John, “The truth shall set you free.” At the time, narrow definitions of truth and freedom, and a tyrannical and deadly self-righteousness were exerting their stranglehold in the country. In this context Bonhoeffer preached,

“‘The truth shall set you free.’ Not our deed, not our courage or strength, not our people, not our truth, but God’s truth alone. Why? Because to be free does not mean to be great in the world, to be free against our brothers and sisters, to be free against God; but it means to be free from ourselves, from our untruth, in which it seems as if I alone were there, as if I were the center of the world; to be free from the hatred with which I destroy God’s creation; to be free from myself in order to be free for others. God’s truth alone allows me to see others. It directs my attention, bent in on myself, to what is beyond and shows me the other person. And, as it does this, I

³*Stories of the Spirit*, 307

experience the love and the grace of God. It destroys our untruth and creates truth. It destroys hatred and creates love. God's truth is God's love, and God's love frees us from ourselves to be free for others. To be free means nothing else than to be in this love, and to be in this love means nothing else than to be in God's truth."

Bonhoeffer hit the nail on the head. The truth is not about us. It's not about our being saved or going to hell, or about our being better or worse than our neighbor. The truth of God actually frees us from our self-absorption. In the face of our insecurity, or our poor self-image, or our quivering ego, God's truth does an unexpected thing. It diverts the spotlight from ourselves. It frees us from ourselves. It frees us to love, to love God, our neighbor, and ourselves.

This is the most amazing truth imaginable. In the old way, the truth that feeds our self-absorption, the truth that makes me say, "I'm right, so you must be wrong," is a truth that fails to cure the problem and leaves misery in its wake, misery for me and for those around me. Jesus said this in a number of ways. He said that the real truth will set you free. He said you must lose your life to gain it. He said with men it is impossible, but with God all things are possible. In every case he was pointing to the irony that our attempts at self-justification and self-aggrandizement make us more miserable. Living for ourselves puts us in a dark cell of solitary confinement. Trying to be happy at the expense of others leaves us ever more defensive and insecure. When Jesus said you must lose your life to gain it, we read it as though he means a sacrifice. Maybe we even think of it something like, make sacrifice now and in heaven you'll get a plasma TV and other happiness. But what he really meant was that it is impossible to be self-absorbed and be happy.

In Jesus' story this morning, imagine if it went another way. What if the Pharisee looked over at the tax collector and said, "O God, you are most amazing and wonderful. It is a beautiful thing that this tax collector has found you in humility and in his need for your mercy. I am thankful, O God, for all I have this morning, but I thank you most of all for reminding me that I, too, am a sinner, and that I, too, stand in need of your mercy this morning." What a difference it would have been had he prayed like that. Amen.