

PRIDE AND PRAYER

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October 24, 2010

Reading: Luke 18: 9-14 (NRSV)

He told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: “Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, ‘God, thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.’

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.’ 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.”

During the years of apartheid, on a flight from Johannesburg, a middle-aged, well-off white South African woman found herself sitting next to a black man. She called the cabin crew attendant over to complain about her seating. “What seems to be the problem Madam?” asked the attendant.

“Can’t you see?” she said. “You’ve sat me next to a kaffir. I can’t possibly sit next to this disgusting man. Find me another seat!”

“Please calm down Madam,” the stewardess replied. “The flight is very full today, but I’ll go and check to see if we have any seats available in club or first class.” The woman cocked a snooty look at the outraged black man beside her.

A few minutes later the stewardess returned with the good news, which she delivered to the lady, who could not help but look at the people around her with a smug and self satisfied grin: “Madam, unfortunately, as I suspected, economy is full. I’ve spoken to the cabin services director, and club is also full. However, we do have

one seat in first class.”

Before the lady had a chance to answer, the stewardess continued, “It is most extraordinary to make this kind of upgrade, however, and I had to get special permission from the captain. But, given the circumstances, the captain felt that it was outrageous that someone be forced to sit next to such an obnoxious person.” With that said, she turned to the black man sitting next to her, “So if you’d like to get your things, sir, I have your seat ready for you in first class.”¹

No one who reads this parable of Jesus can escape the pride of the Pharisee. His prayer is filled with a profound sense of self-creation and contempt for other human beings. He perfectly illustrates Reinhold Niebuhr’s observation:

“There is a pride of power in which the human ego assumes its self-sufficiency and self-mastery and imagines itself secure against all vicissitudes. It does not recognize the contingent and dependent character of its life and believes itself to be the author of its own existence.”²

What is interesting to me is that Niebuhr believed that the sin of pride came before the sins of the flesh. Indeed, he thought that all human sin was rooted in pride.

The words of the Pharisee were not unique. Similar prayers could be heard throughout the Ancient Near East. Perhaps it would be helpful for us to understand what a Pharisee was. The name means, “one who is separated.” That is to say, they were distinguished from other people. Typically, the

¹ The source of this story is unknown.

² Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1941), Vol. I, p. 188.

Pharisee was one who was dedicated to a strict interpretation of Torah and a close abiding of the Law, not only in theory but in personal practice as well. These laws could be incredibly tedious. Take hand washing, for example. It was believed that if you did not wash your hands properly before eating food you had committed a sin. The consequences of this sin included poverty and personal disaster.

Notice that I said properly washed hands. You would be required to use a *log* of water. A *log* was a one and a half eggshell of water. You rubbed your hands together and then let the water run down the length of the wrist toward the elbow. The process was repeated, except the second time the water ran off the hands and fingertips.³ I don't know about you but I am happy if I can get my children to wash their hands before supper using the 15-second rule.

The fastidious nature of keeping the Law and the purity codes that were the foundation of such obsession caused the Pharisees to remove themselves from the daily labor of commerce and human traffic. He did not want to be sullied by the commonalities of life. This Pharisee presumed that he was better than other human beings because he maintained a strict discipline of keeping the law. He kept clean by avoiding human discourse. He was pure because he maintained purity in every aspect of his life. He declared that he

³ William Barclay, *The Parables of Jesus* (Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press, 1970), p. 99.

was superior to thieves, rogues, and adulterers. From hand washing to fornication, the Pharisee saw himself as a superior moral person. He was certain that his superiority was a result of his own hard work. God must surely be closer to him because he has kept the Law. He must surely have a special standing with the Almighty because he has been so good.

But his goodness does not stop there. The Pharisee is even better than that! He prayed harder and more often than anyone else. What is more, he fasted twice a week. Judaism only required one fast day, the Day of Atonement. This man was fasting twice a week. Finally, what every church treasurer loves to hear, the Pharisee tithed 10% of everything he received. He does not just tithe his produce as required in Numbers and Deuteronomy, but everything he received.

What is the real nature of the Pharisee's prayer? It sounds to me like a man telling God how good he is; how much God really needs this fellow; and a man justifying himself before the Spirit of Life. He seems to think, "Well, if I were God, I would be the kind of man God would love to have around and want in his Kingdom." Rabbi Simeon ben Jocai once said, "If there are only two righteous men in the world, I and my son are these two; if there is only one, I am he!"⁴

Augustine observed that the Pharisee's language betrays, not a confession of

⁴ William Barclay, *The Gospel of Luke* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), pps. 265-266.

his own sins, but a disdain over the scars of others. He sounds very much like G. Gordon Liddy, one of the Watergate conspirators. When he was released from prison he said, "I have found within myself all I need and all I ever shall need. I am a man of great faith, but my faith is in George Gordon Liddy. I have never failed me."⁵ It echoes the prayer of the Pharisee, "I have never failed me or God. Just ask me."

In stark contrast is the tax collector. He was not standing aloof from the faithful, but was standing in the shadows of guilt. He offered the most simple, sincere, and profound prayer in all of religion, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" It is the prayer of humility, offered by a man of conflicted conscience.

Tax collectors were men hired by Rome to collect its taxes. These were selected by the lowest bidder, who would have to deliver the expected tax revenue to Rome for an agreed upon sum. There were three basic taxes: a poll tax levied on every person simply because they were alive, a land tax which consisted on one tenth of its produce, and an income tax of one percent of income. There were taxes for entering or leaving a walled town or harbor, crossing a bridge, tolls for road usage including the cart, the number of wheels on a cart and the animal that pulled the cart. Of course the working classes were the most hard-pressed.

The tax collector was free to collect as much money as he could from the people. His only requirement was to deliver to Rome the expected income. Everything above that was for him to keep. Of course there were usurious collectors who bled the people to poverty. But even if a tax collector were an honest and decent

⁵ *The Christian Century*, September 28, 1977, p. 836.

man who only collected enough for his own modest standard of living, he would be a despised man. As I have suggested, the tax structure itself suffocated the populace and kept them in poverty.

My hunch is that the tax collector in the parable is one of those honest agents. He knows that the taxes are crippling families. He knows he has to make a living. But despite his integrity the work is unjust. It's just wrong! Any Jew who has read Torah or the prophets like Amos and Micah knows in his or her heart that God's righteousness is offended by this oppressive system. The tax collector has enough self-honesty and humility to say, "I am a sinner." He is part of the system and he is trapped by his own need to survive.

The truth is that no matter how hard we try to do the right thing, some circumstances compromise our values. We all work for some kind of system and every system barter our best moral standards. We can say, "Well, that's life," or "That's just the way things work." But like the tax collector, we know in our hearts that the decisions or choices made put people to disadvantage or shame. This even happens when the system creates some kind of process that is supposed to protect people. For example, schools have been taking aggressive positions on sexual harassment to protect students and staff. By all means they must do so. But then you hear about the kindergarten boy who is expelled for sexual harassment because he kissed a classmate on the cheek. The school system took a good moral standard and made it into its own ridiculous weapon of tyranny.

There are very strict requirements about how one can spend welfare dollars

with things like food stamps. One cannot, for example, buy cigarettes and beer. I understand that and I think that is smart. But neither can one buy bar soap or diapers. Certainly food is the first priority – AND – personal hygiene is essential to self-respect and dignity. Can you imagine a middle or high school child who cannot use deodorant or shampoo? Think of the self-esteem that is compromised or the potential for ridicule by classmates. Just like the fact that some foods are WIC approved, hygiene products could also be approved. I understand that we would not expect federal assistance to pay for Ester Lauder body wash, but a bar of Dial soap is another matter altogether. The system that is meant to help people is not as humane as its creators thought it would be.

Systems compromise us. Even the best systems compromise the best of us. That is a reality about human beings and the institutions we create. That is true of congregations and clergy as well. We have all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, even if we never robbed a bank, had an affair, murdered our mother-in-law, tortured a kitten, or inadvertently taken home paperclips from the office.

Jesus teaches us that the only attitude that can stand before the altar of God is the attitude of confession and humility. I wonder how the inter-religious conversation might go if humility was a shared virtue. Think how we might deal with the Palestinian problem from the foundation of humility and not the pride of power, politics, or religion.

On a visit to the Beethoven museum in Bonn, a young American student became fascinated by the piano on which Beethoven had composed some of his

greatest works. She asked the museum guard if she could play a few bars on it; she accompanied the request with a lavish tip, and the guard agreed. The girl went to the piano and tinkled out the opening of the Moonlight Sonata. As she was leaving she said to the guard, "I suppose all the great pianist who come here want to play on that piano."

The guard shook his head and said, "Padarewski [the famed Polish pianist] was here a few years ago and he said he wasn't worthy to touch it."⁶

I wonder how our relationships with one another might be if we kept our pride in check. I wonder how our relationship with God might be if we stood before the power of life with humility. Jesus said in the parable that the tax collector went home "justified," before God. That is to say, he did not leave just forgiven. He left forgiven and restored. He left with his relationship with God in tact. He would somehow get through another tedious week of collecting taxes and making his living with God at his side. He may yet do some God forsaken work but the man himself would not be God forsaken. The problem is never that God's hand and heart are closed to us. It is always the problem that our fists are tight and our hearts are locked. It reminds me of the great English author, Elizabeth Barrett Browning.

A childhood accident caused the poet, Elizabeth Barrett, to lead a life of semi-invalidism before she married Robert Browning in 1846. There's more to the story. In her youth, Elizabeth had been watched over by her tyrannical father. When she and Robert were married, their wedding was held in secret because of her father's

⁶ Source unknown.

disapproval. After the wedding the Brownings sailed for Italy, where they lived for the rest of their lives. But even though her parents had disowned her, Elizabeth never gave up on the relationship. Almost weekly she wrote them letters. Not once did they reply. After 10 years, she received a large box in the mail. Inside, Elizabeth found all of her letters; not one had been opened! Today those letters are among the most beautiful in classical English literature. Had her parents only read a few of them, their relationship with Elizabeth might have been restored.⁷

There are plenty of Pharisees in the world. They are at work, school, church, and wherever we play. There is one in my own heart. I do not know how they stand before God. I cannot stand before them without feeling inadequate. What I do need are love letters that say, “Come home,” or “You’re welcome here.” Every one of us needs a note of grace. But we can only go home with God if we open the letter.

Finis

⁷ *Daily Walk*, May, 1992.