



SERMONS THAT WORK

Pentecost 20 – Proper 25 (C)

Going Home Justified

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

In our Gospel lesson, two people go to the Temple to pray, but only one goes home justified. Why?

First on the scene, we meet the Pharisee. He assumes the correct position for prayer: he stands. Yet, he stands by himself, setting himself apart from others. But not too far. From his vantage point, he can scan the crowd of worshippers, can even spy a tax collector hunched over on the edge of the assembly. The Pharisee chooses a place with good sight lines, somewhat apart from others, where he can see and be seen. Chin up, eyes casting about the room, he offers prayers to God that are meant to be overheard.

In his prayers, he uses two age-old strategies to puff himself up. One, he brags about himself. And two, he puts others down. Sound familiar?

Let's start with the bragging. The Pharisee points out to the Lord God Omnipotent, what the Lord surely already knows: he fasts twice a week and gives a tenth of all his income. One wonders for whose benefit he says these things. For God? Hardly. For the other worshippers? He probably thinks so. For himself? Some psychologists at Harvard used MRIs to study the brains of people when they talk about themselves. The same areas light up as when we eat chocolate or have sex. Bingo!

We should note a couple of things about what the Pharisee brags about. The technical term for what the Pharisee does — fast twice a week and tithe on all of his income — is *supererogatory*. In common language, it means he goes above and beyond what is required by the law. At the time of Jesus, there may have been five or six fast days on the Jewish calendar. By saying he fasts twice a week, the Pharisee was boasting of an asceticism that went beyond the norm. The same goes for tithing. Unlike the people of the land who tithe only on the required portion of their income, the Pharisee gives a tenth on all his income. He wants God and everyone within earshot to know about his super-duper observance, which goes well beyond that of the *hoi polloi*.

There are some interesting present-day analogies to the Pharisee's boasts. Apparently, social media is filled with people touting the benefits of intermittent fasting. Tech bros share videos of ice baths. Fitness gurus

post early morning workouts. Corporations are proud supporters of local charities. The more things change, the more they stay the same!

Yet ... perhaps ... not to boast, we are better at it. Many think we now live in the Age of Bragging. An article from a few years ago asked, “Are We All Braggarts Now?” The answer: Yes. The accelerant: Social media. We are encouraged to curate our online personas, create a personal brand, and self-promote in the war for attention. Since most people dislike braggarts — social scientists have done studies — people have even come up with ways to brag without appearing to brag: The so-called “humblebrag.” A humblebrag is when you try to mask your brag with either a complaint — “I’m exhausted from all the interviews I’ve had to do since winning the Academy Award,” or a self-deprecating comment — “I’m such a klutz! I dropped my Academy Award when Brad Pitt congratulated me,” — or phony gratitude — “I’d like to thank all the little people that made it possible for me to win the Academy Award.” The Pharisee thanking God for making him super-observant leans in this direction. Turns out, people dislike humblebraggarts even more than ordinary braggarts — again, social scientists have done studies.

So why do people brag? Psychologists offer a variety of answers, such as insecurity, wanting to be liked, poor social skills, lack of empathy, narcissism, and superiority complexes. We don’t get too much psychological theory in the New Testament. But Luke gives a pretty clear explanation in the introduction to the parable. He says that Jesus “told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt.” People who boast try to portray themselves as righteous. Whether their audience is found in the Temple or on Instagram, braggarts try to prove their righteousness through their superior character and deeds.

Which leads us to the second strategy the Pharisee uses to puff himself up: Putting others down. As Luke tells us, Jesus told this parable to people who regard others with contempt. The Pharisee thanks God that he is “not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector.” Again, sound familiar? An old song speaks of “clowns to the left of me, jokers to the right.” Or maybe updated for today, we’d say “liberal hacks and elitists to the left of me, right-wing wackos and extremists to the right.” We Christians have done our fair share of demeaning each other. “Papists,” “Holy Rollers,” and “Bible Thumpers” aren’t exactly terms of endearment.

Thank God, we enlightened Episcopalians are above all this! With an unparalleled liturgy, glorious vestments, and strategic use of ecclesiastical terms like “narthex,” “sacristy,” and “ecclesiastical,” we do not have to check our brains at the door like other Christian denominations. Bless their hearts.

But more seriously, why do people belittle others? Psychologists offer the following explanations: low self-esteem, insecurity, attempts to control others, masking jealousy, trying to gain status, deflecting attention, and lack of empathy. Again, we don’t find too much psychological theory in the New Testament, but Luke’s explanation is still pretty good. People who trust in their own righteousness often regard others

with contempt. Self-righteous promotion before God goes hand in hand with demeaning others. The Pharisee kisses up and kicks down. Again, the more things change, the more they stay the same.

Second on the scene, we meet the tax collector. He also stands for prayer, but with lowered eyes. He would not even look up to heaven. He stands not only apart, but also far off, not wanting to be noticed. Unlike the Pharisee who assumes a position from which to see and be seen, the tax collector tries to fade into the background. There, he beats his breast as a sign of repentance.

And rightly so, many like the Pharisee probably thought. Tax collectors were contemptible. Not only did they collaborate with the Romans, but they also cheated their fellow Jews. Lumping him in with thieves, rogues, and adulterers was not so far-fetched.

When the tax collector does speak, he utters a simple cry for mercy: “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!” In the Greek text, the tax collector’s entire petition consists of six words. By contrast, the Pharisee’s speech is twenty-nine words, four times as long. The Pharisee boasts about himself and his deeds, using the word “I” four times. The only thing that the tax collector says about himself is that he is a sinner. Unlike the Pharisee who passes judgment on all manner of people, the tax collector passes judgment only on himself.

But the tax collector does one thing the Pharisee doesn’t. He asks for God’s mercy. The Pharisee basically gives God a status report, a curriculum vitae, highlighting his extraordinary piety and practice. He says the words, “God, I thank you,” but in effect, his speech really says, “God, you’re welcome.” What’s God’s mercy have to do with it? According to the tax collector, everything. It’s the only thing he asks for.

That day, the tax collector, not the Pharisee, went home justified.

Jesus concludes the parable by saying, “All who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.” And this is so. But we need to take care not to turn this into a statement primarily about ourselves. The spiritual trap in reading this parable is to say something like, “I thank you, God, that I am humble like the tax collector, and not like that self-righteous Pharisee.” The human propensity to puff oneself up and put others down can easily twist this parable into an occasion for some religious humblebragging.

The parable, however, is not primarily about us. It is about God. In Luke 15:7, Jesus tells us, “There will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.” The saying about the humble being exalted is a saying about God, who does the exalting, God, who does the justifying, God, who rejoices over the repentance of one sinner. The Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector might better be named the Parable of the Merciful God.

We may also rightly understand this parable as not only spoken *by* Jesus but also *about* Jesus. God’s greatest act of mercy is found in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. In John’s Gospel, Jesus’s crucifixion is

also his exaltation. It is at once the paradox of Christ's humiliation and exaltation, and the source of our salvation. As Jesus says, "I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself" (John 12:32). All people — the sinful and the righteous, the humble and the braggarts, the Pharisees and the tax collectors — are drawn into the mystery of redemption through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Now, at the foot of the cross, we can make the tax collector's cry for mercy our own: "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" In Luke's Gospel, we see this enacted in the penitent thief who says, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." And Jesus replies, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise" (23:42-43).

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