

Proud and Humble  
Sirach 35:12-22  
Luke 18:9-14

“He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt.”

No matter what side you find yourself occupying in these contentious times, likely there is some little voice whispering to you in your head as you post on Facebook or listen to the debates or read your newsfeed--a little voice goading you to trust in your own righteousness while regarding those on the other side of the aisle with contempt. If this is remotely the case for you, there could be no better word from the Lord than the parable before us this morning!

Parables, you will remember, mean to turn our perceptions of the world inside out; they describe a world that often seems unfair to our miserly definition of justice or absurd to our better judgment. But more than describing, they present us with a choice about the world we will inhabit going forward: will we return to the world as we have ordered it or will that world become untenable because we have glimpsed a world in which the future of God’s reign has begun?

Luke’s introduction to the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector perfectly describes the world we know. He says Jesus is addressing the parable to those who trust in themselves that they are righteous and regard others with contempt. While you might think the audience would be Jesus’ opponents, if you read the stories that surround this parable, the audience turns out to be the disciples. In fact, according to preacher and teacher Helmut Thielicke, the Pharisee and the tax collector are in us all. On one hand and in order to unsettle our usual ways of hearing the parable, Thielicke rightly imagines the Pharisee to be a highly respected man who is “dead earnest about his service to God. After all,” Thielicke writes, “we can tell at once whether a person’s heart is in a thing when he touches his stomach or his pocketbook....[The Pharisee] fasted and sacrificed and thus cut down his standard of living for God. So for him, God was at least as real as the jingling coins in his purse....[H]e is not one who would say, ‘We commend the offering plates in the narthex to your charity,’ and then collect it for himself, as the publican might do, but...he himself is the first to give.” Maybe his prayer is prompted by the fact that he once stole a peek at the list of pledges from his fellow congregants and literally sucked in his breath when he saw how those with considerable means—like the tax collector--gave so little, while he gave ten percent to God *before taxes*, thereby justifying his prayer that morning in the Temple.

On the other hand, and to make explicit the unexamined reversal of judgment that happens by the time we get to the end of the parable, Thielicke imagines the tax collector praying as he goes down to his home justified: “I thank thee God, that I am not so proud as this Pharisee; I am an extortioner, unjust, and an adulterer. That’s the way human beings are, and that’s what I am, but at least I admit it, and therefore I am a little bit better than the rest of the breed. I commit fornication twice a week, and at most ten per cent of what I own comes from honest work. I am an honest man, O God, because I don’t kid myself, I don’t have any illusions about myself. Let your angels sing a hallelujah over this one sinner who is as honest as I am, honest enough to admit that he is a dirty dog and not hide it beneath his robes like these lying...Pharisees.”

Thielicke’s point is that we all have it in us to be prideful-y humble and to be humbly prideful, an interesting observation but a piece of information that leaves us in the world as we have ordered it. We are what we are. Parables do not give up their truths easily. So let’s try again. Two men go up to the temple to pray, two men who live in some sort of relationship to God and God’s people. One, in fact, was a teacher of Torah who “walked the walk as well as talked the talk” according to Jewish New Testament scholar Amy Jill Levine. The other was a tax collector, an agent of Rome, filthy rich and with no mercy toward those who could not pay their taxes. If you are in a Harry Potter state of mind, think The Minister of Magic and Peter Pettigrew!

One man thanks God, albeit a bit arrogantly, for the life he has been given to lead; the other begs God to forgive him for the life he is leading. In the world as we know it, if the Pharisee were told that the tax collector’s prayer resulted in his justification, his living in right relationship with God, the Pharisee would be dumbfounded. “Is it all as simple as that?” he might think in echoes of the prodigal’s elder brother. “Ask for mercy and then go back to extorting money from God’s people? Does my obedience to the commandments count for nothing?”

Likewise, if the tax collector were told that his life lived apart from God would come to an end from this morning on, would he be changed? Would he, like Zacchaeus, promise to repay all the money he had taken with interest and set out to follow Jesus?

The parable tells us none of this. It merely gives us a snapshot in time. All we know of each man is how he sees himself in the presence of God. The Pharisee sees himself as worthy, but worthy in relation to the less worthy: thieves, rogues, adulterers, tax collectors, to name a few. The tax collector sees himself as unworthy, but unworthy in relation to the holiness of God. I think we may be getting a little closer to the heart of the matter!

You and I know ourselves not in isolation; we know something of who we are in relation to an other—but who is the other? From the little Jesus' parable tells us and the little more we know of ourselves, especially in the midst of this mean season, any sense of ourselves as good, kind, generous, moral, and right often depends on our being these things in relation to others who are bad, mean, stingy, immoral, wrong. Or as Thieliicke observes, "The Pharisee measures himself by looking downward when he tries to determine his rank before God." Surely he knows he has some faults, but he also knows that, compared to others, he is in the right.

With not only politics but stewardship on my mind, I think of the years when we gave you charts and graphs so that you could see your pledge in relation to the pledges of the rest of the congregation. Sometimes the graphs allowed you to locate your pledge among peers in your age group; other times, we there were bars representing pledges made between this and that dollar amount, encouraging you give enough to be in the next bar up. The implicit message? Measure your greater pledge in relation to another's lesser pledge, your generosity by another's stinginess. "This kind of self-measurement," Thieliicke warns, "by looking downwards, always produces pride. Why is it," he goes on to ask, "...Quite simply because at such moments we feel so much better about ourselves." The self-knowledge that comes from looking downward on the other, no matter how far down you yourself actually have fallen, not only produces pride, but also tends to create lives of spiritual vanity. This is the world as we have ordered it.

The tax collector is about to inhabit another world, at least in the snapshot the parable gives us. He knows himself at this moment only in relation to God; and in relation to God, the only prayer any of us have is, "God, be merciful to me a sinner!" "He measures himself 'upward.' God...being his standard. And measuring himself by that standard," Thieliicke says, "he is suddenly aware of how far removed he is [from the human being he was created to be]. But then this is just the time when God is very near to him." Here is the paradox of this parable, the fork in the road, eternity invading time: when the one by whom we measure ourselves is God alone; when the human being we look to in order to know ourselves as human is Jesus Christ, all we know of ourselves is our need for forgiveness, for mercy, for grace, for the love we can never deserve.

This year, we have no graphs to help you see how your generosity measures up to everyone else in the congregation. All we have is a chart that invites you to measure your generosity in relation to the love God has shown you, the life God has given you. "The miracle that happened to the [tax collector] was that he was known and seen through and through [not by the Pharisee but by the eyes of love that] did not close in rejection of the darkness in his life, but opened and beckoned in compassionate welcome and acceptance."

How shall we live? Measuring our worthier selves against the other with contempt or knowing our forgiven selves in face of Jesus Christ? The tax collector went down to his home justified, Jesus told the crowd. He went down to his home as a man whose significance and worth were in God's hand. The Pharisee went down to his home not justified--as a man whose significance and worth were dependent on another's insignificance and worthlessness.

Or did he? The parable is not through with us! According to Amy-Jill Levine, the "standard reading is that the tax collector receives the gift of grace, while the Pharisee...who asked for nothing, received nothing. The problem with this view is that it prompts exactly the same kind of dualistic, judgmental system that Jesus speaks against." But according to other scholars, the *preposition* rendered in the sentence "this man went down to his house justified *rather than* the other" could also mean *alongside*: the tax collector went down to his house *alongside* the other: Hillary alongside Donald, rich alongside poor, white alongside black, Christian alongside Muslim, captive alongside free, powerful alongside powerless, fearful alongside faithful. The one becoming the other in a world where none are righteous save one; in a world where all are justified, put in the right with God and with one another, by the one telling the story, the one whose humbling of himself has humbled and exalted us all! Thanks be to God.