

## Shunning Ostentation

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Luke 18:8-14

This Sunday – Reformation Sunday – is one of my favorites in the church year. We remember the day – October 31, 1517 – when the German priest Martin Luther posted 95 theses, or theological declarations, on the door of a church in Wittenberg, Germany, catalyzing if not commencing what became known as the Protestant Reformation.

Luther's actions, along with those of others, were not meant to start a new church, but rather generate reform *within* the church. Yet the "protest" of Protestant outpaced the "reform" of Reformation. From that point our own Reformed and Presbyterian forbears advanced Luther's movement, taking some things farther than Luther did, and not as far as others would.

I love Reformation Sunday, and I love more and more what it's become. For many decades, it had kind of a "isn't it so great we're not Catholic" feel to it. That sentiment was never, ever to our credit, and I am grateful it has largely passed. I can't help but remember, though, what comedian and thoughtfully devout Roman Catholic Stephen Colbert quipped at the time of the most recent papal transition: "The (current) Pope is out on February 28th but the College of Cardinals may not elect a new Pope until the end of March. Do you realize what this means? We might have an entire month with no infallible person on planet earth! There will be no rules! It'll be a Catholic free-for-all! They'll be ... using the Lord's name in vain," Colbert said, "coveting thy neighbor's wife, killing anybody you want. It'll be like being a Presbyterian!" (February 11, 2013)

So, it's much better than what it was. We've built good relationships with Roman Catholic partners, and come to re-appropriate much of what we jettisoned. On top of all of that, I know there are former and semi-former and not quite former Roman Catholics in almost any Presbyterian gathering, including this morning's.

Why I like Reformation Sunday now is that it allows us to remember our past legacies with gratitude, to lament and confess where they came short or missed the mark, and to refresh and rehearse the values that will still matter as we move into our future.

The presenting issue at the moment of Luther's protest, you will remember, was the sale of indulgences, the notion that you could purchase something, a "holy" thing – if you could afford it – to gain salvation. But indulgences were really a sign of a deeper problem, our inability to rely on, to trust, the loving grace of a merciful God. God's grace is not for sale, nor can it be earned, by word or deed or purchase. It is a gift, given freely and lavishly, a reminder needed then and now, for all of us.

Sometimes I am asked what Presbyterians believe. I always begin my answer with the affirmation that we believe about 98% of what all Christians believe, and that the remaining 2% is important, but rarely a deal breaker, and often a point of emphasis more than anything else.

We put a brief paragraph from our Book of Order (a church constitution is included in that 2%) in the middle of the bulletin. It includes the affirmation of a great theme of the Reformed tradition – “a faithful stewardship that shuns ostentation and seeks the proper use of the gifts of God’s creation...” ***A faithful stewardship that shuns ostentation.*** Shunning ostentation.

It is hardly a strong tagline for a marketing campaign – The Presbyterian Church: We Shun Ostentation. But in the context of this day, and in the context of how we are called to live our lives, *as faithful stewards of every good gift that God gives us*, it matters.

We have been hearing, and wrestling with, difficult parables from Luke’s gospel. Jesus comes at us and at us. This morning’s parable is the clearest we’ve had, but no less challenging. It is simple, but not simplistic.

Two men – a Pharisee, a religious official, and a tax collector. The Pharisee – in full view of all – first thanked God that he was not like others, but rather prayed and fasted and was generous with his income. The tax collector – in a corner somewhere – prayed simply, “God, I am a sinner; be merciful to me.”

Alastair Roberts paints the picture: “For the Pharisee, this future is awaited with a blithe assurance that he will be vindicated within it. When he looked at his life, all of the signs were propitious that he was in the right, a fine specimen of a true and faithful Israelite, a guardian of the nation’s holiness, leaving him free to engage in self-congratulation under the guise of a prayer of thanksgiving. His self-confidence was powerfully bolstered by how favorably he appeared against the foil of the extortioners, unjust, adulterers, and the tax collector, his high self-regard being inseparable from his habitual judgment of others.

If the Pharisee is confident in his righteousness,” Roberts continues, “the tax collector openly addresses God from a position of moral destitution and unrighteousness, throwing himself upon divine mercy. Facing the prospect of God’s coming just kingdom, the tax collector is well aware of where he stands relative to it.”

That’s the set-up. Jesus concludes by telling us that one was justified and the other not, and in case we miss the point, which is really quite hard to do, we get this summary: “for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.”

Simple, right? But never simplistic. Shunning ostentation is not as easy as it sounds, even if we don’t think we have ostentation to shun. Because the Pharisee was right. He *was* devout and generous – any church nominating committee would be all over him. But he made two mistakes. His arrogance; his public braggadocio. More than that was a very Reformation Sunday mistake. He believed his exemplary faithfulness was the product of his own goodness, its own

accomplishment, its own achievement. It was not, which the tax collector, hated by all for his work, got. God, he said, I sin, I need your mercy. The Pharisee could not say that.

Jill Duffield, editor of the *Presbyterian Outlook*, writes this: "Of course, I do not want to imagine myself the Pharisee. I know where most Pharisees stand in the eyes of Jesus: religious rule-followers who fail to see God right in front of them, judgmental, aloof, Godly know-it-alls who exploit the vulnerable. I know enough to know I do not want to be equated to the Pharisee."

I love this parable for how honest it is. And I hope we can be honest with ourselves when we engage it. We may not be the Pharisee in all his fullness. But we rarely are the tax collector in his fullness, either, I wonder, with the hope that I am not projecting too much.

Perhaps you have heard of something called the "prosperity gospel." You can read about it, or watch it on TV. In both black and white American churches, the prosperity gospel makes the case that God wants us to be wealthy, that monetary wealth is a sign of God's favor. Often that takes the form of a wealthy pastor, who loves mansions and flies in private jets and wears expensive suits – face it, these are all men we are talking about!

I mostly don't like to be critical of other church practices; we have enough of our own problems. But the prosperity gospel seems wrong to me, and unfaithful. It is theologically wrong – God doesn't want us to be wealthy. It is ecclesially wrong – Leer jets are trappings of misguided church leadership. But more so it is ethically wrong – people who can't afford it are duped into giving to promote a warped view of the gospel, in what amounts to a modern-day version of indulgences.

The prosperity gospel can be an easy target. So can the Pharisee, standing in the middle of the people bragging about how great his religion is. But think of more nuanced and subtle versions of that attitude. Jill Duffield asks: "If you are being completely honest, who do you think yourself better than? When and why have you judged others?"

Karoline Lewis says it more pointedly: "(I)f we are not found guilty in hearing this parable, we are deluding ourselves. We pray this prayer all too often. With too much justification. With all kinds of explanation for such an expression of relief."

"This passage," Lewis writes, "calls attention to those moments in our...lives -- when we too readily judge...When we size up the other with the assumption that our faith, our spirituality is somehow better...Our security in our own future all too often turns into certainty about the other. Our sense of justification gets caught up in our own self-righteousness rather than true trust in God's love."

David Lose writes that this parable can be a "trap." We easily dismiss the Pharisee's outlandish arrogance, but might carry aspects of it within us. Or we switch quickly to the tax collector's side without fully understanding that his true faithfulness was in understanding that it is always about God, and not him, not us.

“Shunning ostentation” is not as easy as it sounds. And it is only a step on a path. We won’t be as brazen as a Pharisee who prays how great he is and how even more great he is because he’s not the other. We’re not ministers who fly in private jets. But we also can’t be equally brazen in our shunning of ostentation, saying, in effect, look how great we are because of how humble we are – “ours is the best humility!” That can still be a slippery slope, some four days shy of 502 years ago.

Shunning ostentation, humility, leads to service, and service leads us always back to God. Luther’s genius, followed by Calvin’s and countless reformers, known and unknown, then and now, was in understanding that this is about God, and not us. Never about us. Always about God. That stewardship is about cultivating God’s gifts. That justice is about ushering in God’s vision. That we all need God’s mercy, and that some are just more aware of that than others. When we live into that fuller awareness, we will move from formation to reformation to transformation, living holy and joyful and truly humble lives, in the name of God who is sure redeemer and mighty fortress. Amen.