

The Dance of Pride and Humility
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First Congregational United Church of Christ
Luke 18: 9-14
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Life is often a dance between pride and humility. We aspire to live lives of humility, but I think you might agree that such a life takes effort. We seem to have a natural tendency toward pride; to compare ourselves to others with the silent hope of coming out on top! Even in church.

I remember, years ago, when a member of my congregation greeted me after service and offered a suggestion on how to make my sermons more effective.

“Jon, I think what you need to do is point out the wayward ways of your flock every time you preach... and be specific! Turn the spotlight on some of them!”

After listening patiently to her pastoral advice, I remember offering: “But, Louise, what if the light were to fall upon you?”

“Oh! Well,... never mind!” Came the reply.

As we consider the challenges of living a life marked by humility and grace, let us first come together in prayer.

PRAYER:

Gracious and loving God, help us to see ourselves as you see us, not through the lens of shame or of discouragement or of puffed up significance, but with a grateful awareness that you created us, that we're all your children, endowed with great qualities and possibilities. Help us to be our full selves in your presence and in that loving embrace to grow daily into the person you created us to be. Amen.

SERMON:

Last week it was the unjust judge and the persistent widow. This week we have the pious Pharisee and the sinful tax collector. Two parables of contrasts. Let's take a look at the two characters of our story for this morning.

You might know this already but it is worth repeating, the Pharisees have gotten a bad rap over the centuries as a result of one too many gospel portrayals as Jesus' rivals. This reputation despite—or perhaps because—of the fact that they were Jesus' closest theological kin; they shared a depth of knowledge and respect for the Jewish law after-all. But the Pharisees observed that law far more rigorously than Jesus did. In a religion that was and is expressed primarily through practice, rather than belief, this was no small matter, but a point of pride. Devout, respectable, and learned, the Pharisees were the scholars and judges, indeed, the good people, of their day. And they knew it.

Enter a tax collector... Now I trust that none of us here this morning is especially fond of the IRS. But I would venture to say that today's tax men and women are not universally despised in the same way that the tax collectors of Jesus' day were. We're not talking about benign or bureaucratic government employees here, but

collaborators with the occupying enemy, the Roman Empire. As contractors for the empire, tax collectors were free to exact payment in whatever manner they saw fit. And to inflate the amounts due in order to collect healthy commissions for themselves. By definition, they were wealthy, and dishonest...extortionists, more or less. As handlers of money, and agents of a Gentile empire, by Jewish law, they were ritually unclean to boot.

But they were fellow Jews. In fact, that's probably about the only thing tax collectors had in common with Pharisees. And that's how a tax collector and a Pharisee happened to find themselves both praying in the Jewish temple in Jesus' parable.

Now it is readily apparent that the tax collector was fully aware of his shameful status and so he stood alone, off in the shadows. He was too caught up in his prayers of confession to notice his surroundings that day. But, not so the Pharisee. In fact, so observant was the Pharisee that the tax collector even wound up in the Pharisee's prayer! "God," he said, "I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income." Not only was he praying, boasting, and people watching in the synagogue, but he was competing with his neighbors and winning! No doubt, he thought that was the point!

Meanwhile, the tax collector was filled with shame for all that he had done and been. He could not bring himself to look up to the heavens. No, his eyes were glued to the ground as he beat his chest like a person in mourning. "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" he cried out in anguish as he looked into his own heart and broken ways. And, God, recognizing his contrition and humility as sincere, sent him home justified. End of story!

Or is there more?

Did you happen to catch the lesson within the lesson Jesus offers his listeners? It is subtle, but there none-the-less. By any chance did you find yourself condemning the Pharisee for judging the tax collector and all those others he considered below him? Or for bragging and taking all the credit for his own piety and character? It's really hard not to, as pompous and presumptuous as he is: To not give God—or at least maybe his parents or mentors—some credit for his accomplishments. To not even know this tax collector and put him in the same category as thieves, rogues, and worse! To use his prayers as a platform for condemning other people. That takes some nerve! What a jerk!

There it is, the lesson within the lesson. The dance between piety and judgment... pride and humility... and the awkward tumbles that frequently result.

Basically, there's no way out of this parable without taking Jesus' bait: Finding ourselves playing the Pharisee's game, judging and striking a self-righteous pose against him. As much as we'd like to believe we're the earnest tax collector in the story, it's nearly impossible not to be critical of the Pharisee... and thus, our figure pointing ways are on full display.

Several years ago, the Reverend Lillian Daniel offered this reflection in the UCC Daily Devotional. Lillian wrote:

"I am tired of hearing people say stupid things in the name of Christianity.
I am tired of nutty pistol-packing pastors who want to burn the Koran.
I am tired of televangelists who claim that natural disasters are the will of God.
I am tired of Christians who respond to the pain of disease with a lecture about behavior.

I am tired of preachers who promise prosperity.

I am also tired of people who say that they are privately spiritual but not religious.

I am tired of people who have one bad experience with a church and paint the whole of Christianity with that brush.

I am tired of celebrities who criticize the church for being patriarchal and homophobic but do nothing to support the churches that are not.

I am tired of people who say they want a church like ours but cannot be bothered to attend one.

And I am tired of people who criticize churches like ours and go somewhere else... I feel like I live in a society where the stupid and simple in spirituality always trump the depths of a complex faith.

We are a people of itchy ears, who depart from sound doctrine in favor of easy answers.

Perhaps... I am really just tired of myself.

In criticizing others in their faith, I hardly live up to the best in my own faith. Perhaps the people who irritate me the most are exposing my own false doctrines.”

I don't know about you but the first time I read this reflection through, I found myself agreeing with her statements with real gusto. “Yeah, me too!” I exclaimed in my head after each sentence. “I'm sick of that too!” “I'm tired of those kinds of people too!” Only to run up against those last few sentences and have my own judgments turned around on me...yet again.

Oh... guess I'm a finger pointer too. And my brand of arrogance is as unbecoming and divisive as anyone's.

So where do we go from here? With such deep divisions between peoples today—nations, political parties, religious factions—we need answers now more than ever. Well, we can learn a thing or two from the tax collector:

- Keeping the focus on God is key.
- If all our capabilities and accomplishments point back toward the giver of life and grace, there is no room for comparisons, unfavorable or otherwise.
- It's not about us.
- And yet it is.

As the Reverend Carol Reynolds puts it, “Perhaps equally important is remaining open and cognizant of what it is we ultimately share with one another and all people: Our humanity, our brokenness, our desire for love and approval. A sense that, in the grand scheme of things, we're all embraced by a loving and forgiving God.”

“We can only do our own healing work, with God's help. But, while we're at it, we can replace competition and condemnation with compassion. And see where that takes us. We just might discover that our passions, our hopes and dreams, have a whole lot more in common than we think.”

Eric Elnes is a pastor who once served a UCC church in Scottsdale AZ. He is the author of the Phoenix Affirmations, 12 tenants of the ways of belief and practices of progressive Christianity. Four years ago, I heard Eric share his story of how he hoped to highlight the beauty and power of the progressive faith by walking across America with a group of believers.

He shared that at the start of his journey he decided to stop for worship in the middle of nowhere at a tiny Evangelical Church just outside of Phoenix. He admitted, “I wasn't sure I wanted to worship there but

there was nowhere else to go that Sunday morning.” So, his group joined the small congregation for worship. Eric said through most of the service he had a very hard time tolerating the theology and during the prayer time he could not help but lift up his own silent prayer... “Thank you God that we are not like these people.”

Midway through the service, the pastor of the church recognized the visitors and asked Eric to share something about his group... and their beliefs. Eric said, “I decided to offer witness to our Progressive understanding of faith. I wasn’t sure how it was going to go over to be honest.”

“Then something remarkable happened... The pastor came forward and embraced me and recognized our ministry and asked for God’s blessings upon us and asked God to walk with us during our 3000 mile journey. He had the entire congregation surround us and pray for us and then he had some parishioners scramble to put together some bag lunches to help us on our way.” The pastor’s parting words to us were: ‘We will be praying for you on your journey and may it be filled with many blessings!’ Eric confessed that, “It was a trip filled with such blessings... and that morning was the first... and perhaps most significant”

Friends, in that delicate interplay between pride and humility let us try to look upon the faithful movements of other dancers with the grace-filled eyes of our loving and understanding God.

May our prayers begin not with a pronouncement: “Thank you God that I am not like them!” But with words of gratitude... “Thank you God for loving me even in the broken places.”
Amen