

Humility

This has been a pretty good week for me, one in which it's been easy for me to reflect on my blessings. I had some meaningful meetings with some of you and other folks connected to Good Shepherd as well as some connected to my work as City Council President. I got some "attaboys" from friends and colleagues related to my work in both venues. Friday was my birthday – I'm 56 now, if you're scoring at home – and in addition to a terrific dinner with my family with cards and gifts and laughter, I received literally hundreds of messages and notes and calls remembering me on my day of celebration. And I had opportunity again to thank God for all of you and for my colleagues and friends in ministry who advise me and swap ideas with me and make me a better pastor from week to week.

As you all know, I meet with some of those colleagues every Wednesday morning to discuss the lectionary passages for the week. Sometimes, it seems we all have the same themes in mind for preaching. Sometimes, our approaches are quite different. For my friend, Fr. John Forman, rector of St. Elizabeth Episcopal Church in Burien, the last weeks leading up to the beginning of Advent are seen in his tradition as "the Mystical Season." He's busy this month and part of next in plumbing the depths of some of the mysteries of our faith. In counterpoint, I've stumbled upon what I might call "the Practical Season," as the same group of stories from Luke's Gospel have suggested to me some very down-to-earth virtues which I've shared with you. In the story of the Ten Lepers, there was gratitude; in the parable of the widow and the judge, persistence. Today, gratitude will again be part of our consideration as well as the virtue of humility. And as I hold up those virtues for you with their New Testament and 21st century examples, I also want us to reflect on how, just like all of God's good gifts, those human responses can become twisted and go terribly wrong.

Let's start with some consideration of the context of Jesus' story. As always, there are points to be made which the passage of time and cultural differences may have obscured from us. We need to remember, for example, that quite often Jesus, in his parables, turns the world of his audience upside down. We know these stories so well, trust so much in the wisdom of Jesus, that we may have quite forgotten how radical these tales sounded in First Century Palestine. The vast majority of Jesus' audience, upon hearing that a story was about a Pharisee and a tax collector would have made some assumptions very different to our own this morning. We are used to the idea that the Pharisees were Jesus' opponents, preaching a dead religion of rules, rules, and more rules. And we've grown comfortable with the idea that Jesus often held up the rejects in his society as exemplars of grace: tax collectors, women of ill repute, Samaritans, and so forth.

But try, if you can, to hear this story with Judean ears. Pharisees were highly respected religious leaders. They were the ones who were trying to revitalize the ancient religion of the Jews, calling people to be serious about their faith, to be not just good Jews on the Sabbath but on every day of the week, to be grateful to God and to keep themselves pure, unsullied by the pagan influences in the world around them. In many ways, their message was quite similar to that of Jesus and of John the Baptizer. Some scholars believe that Jesus, like Paul, would have received his early religious training from local Pharisees. And for some of them, at least, the relationship with Jesus was not always adversarial. We read several times in the Gospels that he was invited to dinner in the homes of Pharisees; events which Jesus turned into teaching moments. A group of Pharisees is recorded as coming to Jesus to warn him about threats to his life. And there were

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almost certainly Pharisees among his followers if not in his inner circle: Nicodemus was of that party and Joseph of Arimathea may well have been. When we hear this story, we need to remember that the Pharisee would have been expected to be the good guy in the story.

Very much to the contrary, the tax collector would have immediately been seen as the bad guy when named. I've made this point a couple of times recently, so I won't belabor the point other than to say that tax collectors were seen as collaborators with the hated Roman occupiers and also as crooks, unfairly inflating tax bills to feather their own nests. For Jesus to say that it was the tax collector and not the Pharisee that "went down to his home justified" was quite unprecedented.

We need to consider also some things that may be new to some of us as regards the prayers of the two men in our story. Before I get to specifics, though, I want to tell you a little story from my days as a young actor, a story of which I was reminded a couple of times in recent days. You may not know that I walk at the mall several days a week, when we are both able, with my friend Rev. Steven Greenebaum, pastor of Living Interfaith Church. He and I got onto a topic that caused me to relate this story to him and it turned out he knew it. It's in that classic book of modern Jewish culture, The Joys of Yiddish by Leo Rosten. I first heard it, however, from my acclaimed acting teacher, Bobby Lewis, when I was at Rice and he included it in his acting text, which we used in his class, Advice to the Players. It goes like this: In 1920s Soviet Russia, in the middle of the jockeying for power following Lenin's death, Stalin emerges to address an expectant crowd. "Comrades!" he says. "I have in my hand a telegram from Comrade Trotsky, which I think will resolve our current differences of opinion. Let me read it to you: 'You were right and I was wrong. You are the true heir of Lenin. I should apologize. Signed, Trotsky.'" The crowd goes wild! But wait, there's one man in the crowd signaling to get Stalin's attention. "Yes, comrade?" Stalin asks. "Comrade Stalin, I think you know Comrade Trotsky is Jewish." "Yes, I do." "Well, I'm Jewish, too, and I thought I might have an extra insight on what Comrade Trotsky was trying to say. May I read the telegram myself?" "Of course, comrade!" Stalin says. The man gets up and starts reading: "*You were right and I was wrong? You are the true heir of Lenin? I should apologize? Signed, Trotsky.*"

The point that Bobby was trying to make for us young actors with that story is that subtext is important. Simply to know the words in a piece of communication is not enough. We must understand tone and body language and other clues to what is going on in the mind of the person saying the words. That's how actors make a text come alive. It's how we function as real human beings in real life.

I tell you that story to prepare you for some more information about the context of Jesus' story. When Jesus tells his listeners, "Two men went up to the Temple to pray..." those hearing the story would have immediately known the format of those prayers. A Jewish man going to the Temple would have begun like this: "*Barukh Attah Adonai Eloheinu Melekh ha-Olam*" which is to say, "Blessed art Thou, O Lord our God, King of the Universe." The prayer would then continue with a set list of things for which the pray-er was thankful to God, a list which would have likely included the following: "...For not having made me a gentile (Shelo asani goy), ...For not having made me a slave (Shelo asani aved)" and "...For not having made me a woman (Shelo asani ishah)."

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Needless to say, those particular items in the recitation have become quite controversial and even in Orthodox Jewish circles have been amended or dropped. But let's think about the subtext, the meaning behind them, for a moment. If delivered in a true attitude of thankfulness, these remarks become less problematic. Being a Jew in those days (or almost any other) was no picnic. To honestly thank God for not having been made a Gentile was to thank God for being singled out, ridiculed, living under occupation, and so forth. It was a real mark of faith. To thank God for not having been born a slave should also cause one to reflect on the condition of slaves, to remember that they, too, were children of God and that the Children of Israel had been slaves in Egypt. To honestly pray this prayer was to invoke compassion for those at the bottom of the economic ladder. The same could be said for a humbly delivered thanks that one had not been born a woman. To come into the presence of God with such a prayer should elicit from a worshipful man the realization that society was unfair to women, that they needed to be protected and celebrated, and, if one was the beneficiary of a patriarchal society, the very least one could do was to be grateful.

It's easy to see, though, how the prayer of our friend the Pharisee went off the rails. It's easy to see how a prayer delivered with gratitude and humility can mean one thing while the same prayer, delivered when one is feeling on top of the world and a little smug, can mean something entirely different. And if one is feeling righteous because one is *not* a Gentile, a slave, or a woman, it's also easy to slide into feeling righteous because one isn't one of those obviously unrighteous men like a tax collector. And then it can also seem like high time to remind the Almighty of just how deserving one is of God's favor. It's easy to go from humility to hubris.

Now let's consider our friend the tax collector. Unlike the Pharisee, he knew he was in need of God's mercy. He may have been wealthy but he knew his riches would be considered misbegotten. He probably got regular reminders of just how reviled he was by his neighbors. He may have stood "far off" not only out of a sense of not being worthy to approach too near the altar but to make sure that he could be aware of anyone who approached him in case they meant him harm. He has no righteous acts to boast about and even if he tithes more than required, like the Pharisee, and fasts more than required, like the Pharisee, he feels altogether undeserving of the mercy of God for which he pleads.

It's worth noting, however, that the tax collector doesn't move from humility to humiliation. He may be quietly beating his breast but that would be the normal religious gesture for penitents. Old time Catholics will remember the pre-Vatican II days when the Act of Penance included that same gesture along with the Latin phrase, "*Mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa* (By my fault, by my fault, by my most grievous fault)." The tax collector isn't wailing or throwing himself on the ground. He is acknowledging his faults to God, not looking to make a point with those around him.

It's worth noting that we Christians have learned to pray by both of these examples. Just as a young Jewish boy would be, I was taught early that the way to begin a prayer is to thank God for God's blessings. I've done it already twice this morning. I hope it doesn't make my prayers on our behalf boring or predictable but I just can't break myself of the habit and I'm not sure I want to do so. And for centuries, Christians around the world, particularly in the Orthodox tradition, have prayed a variant of the tax collector's prayer, sometimes referred to as "the Jesus prayer":

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“Lord Jesus Christ, son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.” It is often taught as a meditation device, being prayed silently as one inhales and exhales: “Lord Jesus Christ, son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.” It’s actually a little smoother in the Greek of the New Testament but that’s a lesson for another time.

Now it’s obvious from the way in which Jesus ends this story that he intends us to take the tax collector as our model. Humility is preferable to hubris – the inappropriate pride which leads us to believe that we’ve done God and humankind a favor by our very existence rather than owing a debt to God who created and sustains us and those humans who’ve helped make us what we are. And I’ve also just pointed out how we’ve actually benefitted from the modes of prayer offered by both of these characters, although the Pharisee prayed insincerely or at least wrong-headedly. I would also say that there are ways in which both of these characters can serve us as cautionary models. There are ways in which we *don’t* want to emulate them, or at least we don’t want to take it too far.

We probably all know, for example, folks who just can’t seem to get past their own sinfulness. Unlike the tax collector, when they confess, they don’t go down to their own home feeling justified. They cling to their sins, feeling that they must repent for the same thing over and over, never daring to believe in God’s mercy. This is not only not believing that God will do what God has said but a kind of reverse pride: “I’m so bad not even God can forgive me.” In telling this parable, Jesus is giving the example from which springs a famous verse in the First Epistle of John: “If we confess our sins, God who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” Period. Another lovely illustration of this is in one of my favorite movies, “Monty Python and the Holy Grail.” I’ve shown the clip here before; perhaps you remember? Before being given their quest in an appearance of God to them, Arthur and his knights of the round table throw themselves upon the ground as God speaks: “Arthur! Arthur, King of the Britons! Oh, don't grovel! One thing I can't stand, it's people groveling. And don't apologize. Every time I try to talk to someone it's 'sorry this' and 'forgive me that' and 'I'm not worthy'. What are you doing now?! (I'm averting my eyes, O Lord.) Well, don't. It's like those miserable Psalms -- they're so depressing. Now, knock it off!” All kidding aside, self-humiliation isn’t the point. As Brother Will Campbell so famously said, “We’re all bastards but God loves us anyway.” The point is to learn to love others.

The more clear and present danger, for most of us, is pride, hubris, thinking much too highly of ourselves. In this election season, there are some obvious examples but be careful! Are the exaggerated claims of any candidate or party really worse than our own condescension toward them? Any time we spend too much energy on describing or mocking someone else’s sins, we are only adding to the brokenness of the world, not healing it. I will do my best to exercise judgment informed by the values of Jesus when I fill out my ballot and I would expect all of you to do the same. But I urge you not to indulge in the relentless tearing down of the various candidates, parties, and initiatives that others, in good faith, are backing. That’s no way to shalom. And it’s not a good path to humility, either.

I’ve had a couple of large scale lessons in the dangers of hubris in my life. Connie and I and Charlotte and Jane and Pam and Charlie all lived through the devastating time of the “Southern Baptist Holy Wars” back in the late 70s through early 90s. The common narrative of those days

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is about the way in which Conservatives and Fundamentalists created a political structure to seize control of the Convention but the older I get and the farther away from those days, the more I become convinced that leaders of the Moderate faction were in part to blame because they did not act with humility toward their brothers with whom they did not agree theologically. There was hubris to spare on both sides.

And as I continue to work for multiculturalism and racial justice in our Evergreen Association and in my work with the City of Lynnwood, the more I continue to come up against the reality of White Privilege, which is itself a form of pride and lack of humility. Too often, those of us with primarily European heritage simply take our point of view for granted as the only sensible point of view. We fail in our humility toward our brothers and sisters of color not because we mean to be cruel but because we're simply so used to having things our way. It's not unlike thanking God for making us who we are without reflecting upon the responsibilities that our God-given identities impose upon us or on the God-given dignity and worth of those who are not like us. We so very easily fall into the same trap as did the Pharisee.

It's very, very dangerous to speak of one's own humility and particularly so to hold oneself up as an example of the blessings of humility. So, I'm going to say up front that I'm very aware, as I'm sure you all are, that I am very much a work in progress, with lots left to learn and a lot of what I've learned still waiting to be realized in my life. But I am very grateful to God that God has granted me many blessings as I've attempted, however falteringly, to walk the path of humility. Because I've been upfront about my own shortcomings in the area of racial justice, I've been embraced by leaders in the Black, Hispanic, and Asian Caucuses of our Association and by members of their churches. Because I've tried to push down my unfortunate tendency to want to say, "Here, let me show you the right way," and instead tried to embrace a stance of "may I walk alongside you and learn with you and from you," I've been honored beyond my belief by the NAACP and individual members who call me friend and brother and mean it. For an old Southern White Boy like myself, who has labored for years under the burden of guilt produced by being both the descendent of oppressors and of the oppressed, by being a Son of the South where the most egregiously racist views were and are aired in the homes of some of my family, these blessings of fellowship and inclusion are beyond measure. And I am so aware that they have come because I have, however imperfectly, committed to a path of humility, of listening before deciding, and, as the late Will Rogers put it so well, of never missing a really good chance to shut up.

And, oh, look! Here's one of those chances now. For the mercy of God, for the love of Jesus that shines through his stories, and for the fellowship of the Holy Spirit which binds us *all* together, thanks be to God!