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“Humility”  
Luke 18:9-14

Humble Thyself In the Sight Of the Lord

INTRODUCTION

Tonight’s Parable is a parable on humility. It is a story Jesus told about two very different men and their rather different approaches to prayer. Hear the word of God. Read Luke 18:9-14

Henry Augustus Rowland, professor of physics at Johns Hopkins University, was once called as an expert witness at a trial. During cross-examination a lawyer demanded, "What are your qualifications as an expert witness in this case?"

The normally modest and retiring professor replied quietly, "I am the greatest living expert on the subject under discussion."

Later a friend well acquainted with Rowland's disposition expressed surprise at the professor's uncharacteristic answer.

Rowland answered, "Well, what did you expect me to do? I was under oath."

Tonight’s parable is about a humbling experience. Through it Jesus paints a picture of two very different kinds of men and two very different kinds of prayer.

One of the men was a deeply religious man. The Pharisee stood up and prayed in a voice just barely loud enough to be heard across the street, ‘God, I thank you that I am not like all other men – robbers, evil-doers, adulterers – or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give back to you a tenth of all I receive.’

The Pharisee used prayer as a means of getting public recognition, not to seek to commune with God. In fact, the Pharisee stops just short of congratulating God on what a great job God did in creating him! He sets himself apart, not just from the tax collector, but from all other men!

The other man was a tax collector. We are now in the month of March. Have any of you ever been audited? Very few folks greet and IRS audit with enthusiasm. They wonder if they did anything wrong. They wonder if their records will adequately support their audited tax returns. They wonder how much more money they will have to pay to Uncle Sam as a result of the audit. Let’s just say that a tax audit is not exactly one of the blessings of living in the USA for which we will be offering thanks come the last Thursday of November. Now I want you to imagine the person behind the desk at the IRS, the one who will be conducting your audit. Imagine that he is not only intimidating and distrustful, but also dishonest (I know it’s a stretch, but try to imagine that).

Imagine that he will receive a percentage of the corrected amount resulting from the audit, and that he will do or say almost anything to prove that what you paid was not enough.

Now I certainly don't want to imply that this is the way the IRS works in America, but that IS the way tax collectors operated in the time of Jesus. Tax collectors were among the most corrupt and despised and feared people in society in those days. They were out to get not just a few, selected people here and there, but EVERYBODY! They frequently operated beyond the law with no fear of punishment, changed the rules wherever they wanted to, collecting taxes from people in heartless and dishonest ways.

This is the kind of man Jesus is talking about when he says, "But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and whispered, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.' Jesus said, "But this man, rather than the other, went away justified before God." What?????

I suppose this is a question we could ask about a lot of Luke's stories about the words and actions of Jesus. What's going on when God sends His only Son to be born of a peasant girl in a stable in Bethlehem? What's going on when Jesus talks to the Samaritan woman at the well? What's going on when Jesus allows a woman of the streets to wash his feet with her tears and dry them with her hair? What's going on when Jesus invites Zacchaeus (another tax collector) down out of the sycamore tree and goes to his house for dinner? What's going on when Jesus, the very Son of God is nailed to a cross to die a criminal's death?

And we continue to ask that question in many circumstances today. What's going on is this story? What's going on is life. What's going on is humanity, immortality, the limits and frailties and brokenness of human existence. It's the reality that every one of us falls short of living a loving, faithful life. It's the reality that every one of us struggles with the hollowness and emptiness that creeps in as we try to cope with the secret sorrows of our lives.

As we hear the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector, we hear the gospel theme of reversal. The one we expect to be judged faithful is not. The one we expect – or maybe even secretly WISH – to be condemned is redeemed.

Albert Schweitzer was laboring one day, under the hot African sun, building his hospital at Lambarene. A large timber had to be raised into place, and try as he might, Schweitzer couldn't manage it alone. He looked up and saw a well-dressed African man standing in the shade of a building, and asked him to lend a hand. "O, no," the man said, "I don't do that kind of work. I am an intellectual." Albert Schweitzer, with five earned doctor's degrees, said, "I used to be an intellectual, but I couldn't live up to it." That's humility.

In Jesus' parable, two men went to worship before the altar. One was a good, Bible-believing, faith practicing, tithing Pharisee. The other was a money-grabbing, immoral, corrupt tax collector. The two men went back home after worship. One, the tax collector, went home forgiven, justified, blessed. The other was not.

It's so easy for our best-intentioned prayers of thanksgiving to slip into self-congratulation, even as our best acts of charity can become subtle ways of making ourselves look good.

Neither the Pharisee nor the tax collector is the hero of this parable. Both of the characters in the story are sinners. One sins knowingly and the other unknowingly, but both come to the altar of prayer as sinners, just like us.

The Pharisee sinner didn't seek God's mercy in his kind of prayer. He came with his hands clenched and full, so he went back home empty. The hard truth of prayer is that you quite often get exactly what you ask for. Like the Pharisee, when we don't always ask for God's mercy, so we don't get it.

Now understand that the tax collector is NOT a good person. Jesus doesn't say that. The tax collector is a sinner, a man who has been dishonest and sometimes cruel. But he had a realistic assessment of his own wretchedness. He acknowledged his shortcomings and his need for forgiveness.

What's going on in this parable is that God is transforming reality, changing our expectations. God is being God, loving and embracing everyone who falls short, everyone who stumbles, everyone who knows the frustrations of life.

This is a parable about prayer, about a typical Sunday morning worship service in every church every where. Jesus says that before any altar of God, in any service of worship, whether it's in a magnificent cathedral or a storefront church in a shopping center, you mainly find two sorts of folks: Pharisees and Tax Collectors.

Very few of us are one or the other ALL the time, but most of us are sort of like one or the other some of the time.

There are times when we come to worship as good, Bible-believing, righteous Pharisees who ask for nothing and get exactly that. We are so pleased with ourselves, so competent, so well-liked in the community. And yet we go home to Sunday dinner with a gnawing emptiness which we sometimes blame on the preacher, (sometimes rightfully so,) but most often because we were so full when we got to church that nothing else would fit.

But there are other times, when we enter a house of worship as tax collectors

needing everything, empty, lost, painfully aware of our sinfulness and our need of God's mercy. And we go home with even more than we dared to ask for.

God's love extends to sinners of all shapes, sizes, and colors, ages and stages in life whether we agree with the choices they have made or not, whether they have memorized the great prayers of the saints of the church and can quote them on demand or whether the best they can muster is "God, have mercy on me, a sinner."

William Beebe, the naturalist, used to tell this story about President Teddy Roosevelt. At Sagamore Hill, after an evening of talk, the two would go out on the lawn and search the skies for a certain spot of star-like light near the lower left-hand corner of the Great Square of Pegasus. Then Roosevelt would recite:

"That is the Spiral Galaxy in Andromeda. It is as large as our Milky Way. It is one of a hundred million galaxies. It consists of one hundred billion suns, each larger than our sun."

Then Roosevelt would grin and say, "Now I think we are small enough! Let's go to bed."

George Washington Carver, the scientist who developed hundreds of useful products from the peanut said, "When I was young, I said to God, 'God, tell me the mystery of the universe.' But God answered, 'That knowledge is reserved for me alone.' So I said, 'God, tell me the mystery of the peanut.' Then God said, 'Well, George, that's more nearly your size.'"

Thanks be to God, that there is enough mercy for all us SINNNERS, for Pharisees and tax collectors – Preachers and Presidents and everyone who now and then needs an extra heavy dose of ... humility.

Let's Pray, Lord have mercy on us, sinners all. Forgive us and give us a renewed sense of your presence with us and in us as we strive to make a difference in our world by expressing the difference you have made in our lives. Thank you that there is nothing we can do to make you love us any more. And nothing we can do to make you love us any less. We Love you Lord. Thank you for your mercy and grace. This we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.