

“The Problem with Piety”
Texts: Isaiah 58:1-12, Luke 18:9-14
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Atlanta, GA
October 24, 2010

“He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt...” Luke 18:9

Thanks to the wonder of YouTube and my seemingly inexhaustible interest in the political realm, I’ve spent entirely too much time in recent weeks watching campaign commercials from political races all over the country. I find the content and tone of local campaign ads fascinating, and I think they tell us a lot about the state of our democracy. In this “crunch time” leading up to the elections on November 2nd, the tenor has become increasingly hostile and negative, and the content has increasingly focused on opponents. That is, more and more, I see commercials that tell me almost nothing about the candidate sponsoring the ad, instead concentrating on the weaknesses, failings, and vices of an opponent. We often complain about such pieces from both ends of the political spectrum, describing them as “attack ads” and “mudslinging.” They disappoint us and erode our trust in the political system. And, perhaps most disturbingly, they are successful. These attack ads get results. I remember one of my political science professors in college explaining that the reason for the prevalence of such campaign ads was their consistent record of effectiveness. “It turns out,” he said with a scholarly grin, “that in politics you really can lift yourself up by tearing others down. I have the research to prove it.”

Lifting yourself up by tearing others down. It is a playground ethic that is also played out in almost every realm of our society, even in communities of faith. It is a shameful human instinct that has been with us for a very long time, and invades every part of our lives. Jesus must have known this, because in the eighteenth chapter of Luke’s gospel, he tells a parable that is as timely as the latest attack ad or Sunday sermon. A parable that captures the heart of this regrettable human instinct. A parable about two approaches to prayer.

First, there is the Pharisee, standing alone, surely in a prominent and visible spot. His prayer is less request than resume recap, describing before God (and anyone within earshot) his piety and faithfulness. But, before getting to this laundry list of self-congratulatory accolades, the Pharisee begins with what he is not. Namely, he is not like other people: sinners, rogues, and even the tax collector who is standing next to him. In his prayer, the Pharisee lifts himself up by tearing others down. It is the most blatant form of attack ad, broadcast in the presence of his assumed opponent and with the stale air of conceit. Thank God I am not like him.

But the tax collector cannot hear the Pharisee’s prayer, or his attack. Jesus says that the tax collector is standing far off, and is begging for God’s mercy. His prayer is no public spectacle but private devotion. He prays for forgiveness, admitting before God *his* weaknesses, failings, and vices, with no time to research those of the Pharisee. He lifts himself up, not through insult of others, but through candid petition and honest confession. Lord, have mercy on me.

And, according to Jesus, he returns to his home justified. The moral of the story is explicit: if you exalt yourself, you will be humbled; if you humble yourself, you will be exalted. It is a simple story, with profoundly relevant and contemporary consequences concerning the power of humility.

The power of humility. It is, of course, a frequent theme in the gospel teachings of Jesus. The last shall be first, and the first shall be last. Any who want to be my disciples must deny themselves, take up their cross, and follow me. Whoever wants to be first must be servant of all. You also must wash one another's feet. Those who wish to save their lives must lose them. All those who humble themselves will be exalted.

It is also a bizarre and mystifying promise for we who belong to the 21st Century and celebrate its emphasis on self-promotion. The exalted of our day tend not to be saints but celebrities. And, in a culture of endless and cutthroat competition, we are required to promote ourselves in order to get into the best schools and be considered for the best jobs. Humility has almost no place in our time. And in far too many cases, self-promotion bleeds into other-demotion; our effort to get to the top requires pushing others down or out.

And the church, the place where we might hope humility would still have a foothold, has given in as well. While professing our unity in Christ and our common mission, we have too often demonized and criticized those who go about that mission differently. We have been dismissive of those with different viewpoints, and we have run the religious equivalent of attack ads against other churches and theologies. If the Christian community cannot find its way back to the teachings of Jesus that emphasize humble servanthood and love and civility and respect, then I fear we've lost the uniqueness of our mission and our witness to the world. Those who humble themselves will be lifted up.

We Presbyterians can lead the way toward a revival of humility, simply by claiming and explaining a doctrine that too often embarrasses us. The doctrine is total depravity, and it reflected John Calvin's belief that the power of Sin infects and affects every part of human life. Our depravity is total, no part of our lives are left untouched by sinful desire and action. Because of this, none of us can rightly stand in the place of the Pharisee. All of us must pray to God to have mercy. For Calvin, it was a comforting and not depressing doctrine. This is because, left to our own devices, we rarely get it right. We are indeed depraved, unable to do the good we desire and always somehow managing to do what we know isn't right. But the good news of the gospel is that we are never left to our own devices. The power of God is at work in us, and through us. This gospel truth is the only reason for faith and hope, and it is reason enough.

Those of you who are relatively new to the Presbyterian denomination may have noticed that each week, after we have been called to worship and sung a hymn of praise, we pray together and in silence a prayer of confession. We ask for God's forgiveness. And we are then assured that God does forgive, God does renew. This act of cleansing and confession lifts us up into the presence of God, preparing us to hear the word of God with open hearts and minds. We do so by comparing ourselves to others or criticizing those who lack the piety to be at worship this morning, but by coming to God with honest and open confession. It is a reminder of the power of humility in the midst of a culture drunk on self-exaltation.

No piece of news has more troubled me in years than the recent outbreak of tragic deaths

due to cyber-bullying in schools and universities all over the country. The stories break my heart and they implicate us all. The origin of these horrific actions is nothing new. The goal is to make yourself bigger, better, or more popular by pushing someone else aside, by tearing down those who are vulnerable or different. By saying, "I thank God that I am not like him." How will the church respond? As a community of faith, and as a nation, we **must** stand together in opposition to this kind of brutality. We must create safe places for our children and youth to be themselves and feel accepted and loved. We cannot allow a culture of antagonism and derision to continue claiming the lives of our young people. For God's sake, we have stand up and be counted.

At its best, the church of Jesus Christ is a counter-narrative to the one-upsmanship that characterizes too much of the world surrounding us. At our worst, we exacerbate the crisis by exalting ourselves and enshrining one particular perspective, namely ours. The church must embody the humble ethic of the tax collector, and we must resist the urge to pray in the posture of the Pharisee.

This morning's sermon title may have surprised you. After all, how could a Christian pastor possibly have a problem with piety? Shouldn't we honor the devout reverence and godliness of the faithful? Of course we should. The problem with piety is that, in the hands of humans, it too quickly turns to golden calf. The Pharisee is condemned not for being pious but for worshipping his piety as an idol. I thank you that I am not like other people. The tax collector is praised for the authenticity of his prayer.

This morning's scripture from the prophet Isaiah offers a contrast between pretentiously pompous piety and true worship. Like the Pharisee, the people of Israel have been carefully attentive to the proper (and public) acts of pious faith. Like the Pharisee, they pray regularly and fulfill the requirements of the law. Like the Pharisee, they engage in the spiritual discipline of fasting. But the prophet contends that their piety is surface-level. True worship, he says is this: to share your bread with the hungry, to bring the homeless into your home, to clothe the naked and to bring justice to the oppressed. To denounce the bullying of the marginal. True worship transcends mere piety and transforms human lives. True worship never attacks, condemns, or belittles others but lifts them up and us along with them. True Christian worship recognizes that there is no more level terrain than the ground at the foot of the cross, where all of us cry out, "Have mercy on me, Lord, for I am a sinner." And where all of us hear words of comfort and forgiveness.

One of my heroes, Dr. Paul Farmer, has argued, "the idea that some lives matter less is the root of all that is wrong in the world."¹ True worship will never let us believe that any life matters less, for all are precious to God. True worship will never leave us in a position of superiority over others, but rather in a posture of humble service. True worship will always compel us out of these doors, to serve a world that needs the truth that we have to offer: the truth of a God whose love extends to all people and who does not choose favorites. The truth of a God whose forgiveness washes over all of us like a flood, and clothes us with a righteousness not our own. The truth of a kingdom where all will be at home, all will be free to live as they were created to be, where no one will be cast aside, left out, ridiculed, or bullied. When we share that truth, when we truly worship **that** God then, well the prophet says it best: your light shall break forth like the dawn. Light of the world. Time to shine. Amen.

¹ From Tracy Kidder's *Mountains Beyond Mountains*, Random House, 2009. p. 294.