

Luke 18:9-14

Jesus also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt:

"Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.'

But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven but was beating his breast and saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!'

I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other, for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted."

Introduction

We are living in an age of arrogance and braggadocio. It seems that everywhere we turn we see people preening like peacocks and boasting about their looks, money, achievements, or style. Television and social media play a big role in this as influencers, entertainers, athletes, and entrepreneurs try to get your attention and your money. It is not enough to be a talented musician, you have sing about how you are the greatest of all time and that your rivals are bums. Athletes compete not just to win but to be on the highlight reels with their celebrations. Politicians claim to be the smartest and insult their predecessors. Influencers constantly brag about their attractiveness and savviness. I heard recently that parents are spending thousands of dollars competing with other parents over whose child has the best birthday party. Billionaires who have more money than they could even count have to brag about how much richer they are than other billionaires. Young people are told in school that they have to establish their own brand and let employers know how great they are. Even in Christianity, we have preachers who seem to confuse devotion to God with devotion to their own status and fame.

This is also the age of the humble brag when someone says something that appears self-deprecating but really highlights their achievements. How many people, I wonder, in job interviews have claimed that their worst problem is that they are overachievers and perfectionists? In the church, we can even brag about being humble. In his

parody song Amish Paradise, Weird Al Yankovich sang that he “is a million times as humble as thou art.” Or, as I’ve often said in my Moravian history classes, Moravians have delusions of humility rather than delusions of grandeur. Sometimes, even our prayers to God can sound like a recitation of how much more we have to be grateful for than other people.

Pharisee

In our gospel lesson for this morning, Jesus teaches a powerful lesson about prayer and spirituality that directly contradicts our modern obsession with self-promotion. Jesus was such a good story teller that we can easily see the two men in the parable as they offer their very different prayers in the Temple. Jesus tells us that one of them is a Pharisee and the other a Tax Collector, but in some ways that does not matter. We can see from their actions in the Temple who they are. One of them is confident and proud. He is the kind of person who can swagger while sitting down. He is not plagued by self-doubt or anxiety. He is so well-fed that he can fast twice a week without damaging his health. He is so prosperous that he doesn’t have to skimp on his offerings to the Temple. He is so certain of his righteousness that he boldly stands alone where everyone can see him give his prayers. He assumes that even the priests and rabbis will recognize his sanctity. And he prays loudly, thanking God for making him such a wonderful person.

You may remember that old song by Carly Simon “You’re so vain,” that tells a rich handsome man that he is so vain he probably thinks the song is about him. That’s the Pharisee. He is so vain that he thinks that the Temple and the prayers and the fasting and everything in his religion is about **him**. He stands alone in the Temple and talks about himself.

Just to make sure that his audience gets the point, Jesus tells us that the man happened to be a Pharisee. For centuries, Christians have misunderstood this parable as being critical of Pharisees and their form of devotion. The man in the parable is not a pompous self-absorbed judgmental creep because he is a Pharisee. He probably became a Pharisee because he was already a judgmental self-absorbed braggart who used religion to promote his own status.

The Pharisees of Jesus’ time were people who studied the Scripture and sincerely tried to please God by following the laws of Moses as strictly as they could. A few of them were rich, but most were what we might call middle class. They did not have to labor

like poor people and they had extra money give alms to the poor. Modern Judaism has its roots in the Pharisee movement of Jesus' day, and some of the Pharisee teachers were wise and compassionate interpreters of Scripture. But the Pharisees, like many Christians today, sometimes focused so intently on appearing righteous that they missed the point of religion entirely. Instead of using their religious rules, like fasting, to help them become more compassionate, understanding, and forgiving, they became proud and filled with contempt for everyone who fell short of their standards.

Not like other people

The Pharisee is thankful to God that he is not like other people. He is not a thief or rogue or adulterer. He is prosperous enough to be an honest person and he is faithful in marriage. He is thankful to God that his self-discipline has been richly rewarded, but it is not enough that he is happy he is good. He must be better than other people and they must know that he is better. People like the Pharisee treat religion like a fraternity or sorority that has to black ball the riff raff and the common folk to make you feel elite.

Perhaps the most telling thing about this Pharisee is that he was standing alone. Even in the house of God, the Pharisee is alone. He wants God to look at **him** and **him** alone. He is afraid that the sinners, the beggars, the lepers, and the little people will infect him if he touches them. He must keep his skirts clean and his eye on the prize.

Tax collector

And then there is the other guy. Jesus has to point him out to us because he is hidden in the shadows of the Temple. He is standing in the back, not because he wants to get to the coffee first after worship, but because he does not want anyone to notice him. He is humble, not because he is trying to be humble. He is humble because every day his neighbors humiliate him. He is humble because he knows that the righteous look down their noses at him and spit on the ground as he walks by. He is humble because he knows he can never offer one of those long and eloquent prayers that he hears others praying. He hasn't memorized the Psalms and he doesn't keep the Ten Commandments in a little container tied to his forehead like the Pharisees.

He is a tax collector that makes him a figure of hatred and ridicule. I used to have an IRS agent in my Sunday School class, and he was a paragon of virtue and kindness, but he was hesitant to tell people what he did for a living. It was much worse in Jesus' day. This man was collecting taxes for the Roman Empire that controlled Judea. He

was collecting the money that paid the soldiers who were abusing the Jewish people. the only way the tax collector's only salary came from overcharging people and collecting more than required.

We don't know much about this man. If he had a chance to speak, he may have told us that the reason he was a tax collector was because he was trying his best to keep his neighbors from being assaulted, abused, and killed by underpaid Roman soldiers. He may have told us that he had been forced to collect taxes to protect his family from arrest. Perhaps he saw no difference between paying taxes to Ceasar and paying taxes to the corrupt priests who ran the temple. We know almost nothing about this man other than the fact that he was suffering spiritual pain. He does not try to justify himself and convince God that he is better than he is.

He felt so unworthy that he could barely step into the beautiful Temple. He could not lift his head to marvel at the stones. All he could do is whisper to God, to ask God to show him mercy because he was a sinner. His heart was broken and his head was bowed, not as a show of piety, but because he was afraid to look up. Have mercy on me, a sinner. Like the Pharisee he is talking about himself, but he does so in self-awareness and humility. Lord, have mercy upon me. He is like George Bailey on the bridge in *It's a Wonderful Life*, simply begging God to let him live again.

Justified

And God heard the Tax Collector's prayer. Jesus says that he left justified, which means that he was brought in a right relationship with God. He did not justify himself or his actions to God. Unlike so many of our public figures today, he does not try to convince others that he bears no responsibility for any harm people experienced because of his actions. His lawyers did not write him a carefully worded non-apology that says he is sorry if others were offended by him. No, he simply opens his heart in prayer to God, and God hears his prayer.

Later this morning we will have our church council, and it is important to think about why we have church. When we say that everyone is welcome at Home Church and that we hope that this place will truly be home for you, what we are saying is that we hope you will bring your true self to church. We are saying that we hope you will open your heart to God and let God know your pain, your fear, your shame, and your deepest need. In our Ground of the Unity, Moravians acknowledge that we are a church of sinners who need forgiveness daily. We are grateful to Christ that we do not

need to stand alone and recite our spiritual resume to prove that we are worthy of God's grace. We can pray, Lord have mercy on me, a sinner, and let God justify us.

Conclusion

The oldest liturgical prayer in the Christian church is simple. In Greek it is Kyrie eleison. Lord, have mercy. At the end of this service we will pray this prayer, and I hope we can truly pray it in the depth of our hearts. Christ, have mercy upon us. Amen.