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Luke 18:9-14

WATCH THAT SPIRITUAL PRIDE!

Almost three decades ago I did a rather audacious thing. I was the minister of Bushnell Congregational Church in Detroit, and we had just voted not to sell our historic building in the Rosedale Park section of NW Detroit, which had become a predominately black neighborhood after the assassination of Dr. King and the terrible riots that followed, in order to move to the all-white suburbs and build a new church far from the troubles of the city.

During my brief tenure at Bushnell, I had an epiphany that made it impossible for me to participate in the relocation of another predominately white church from what we euphemistically called a “changing neighborhood.” So I wrote a sermon entitled, “Why I Changed My Mind About Leaving Detroit.”

Oh, it sounds good now, but there was one small problem with it at the time. I had been hired to preside over the sale of the downtown church, once the 9th largest UCC church in America, and a magnificent Georgia Colonial structure sitting at one of the busiest intersections in Detroit. The money was then to be used to build the new church in Novi, Michigan, where there were, of course, no black people. You can perhaps easily understand why I changed my mind — but the rightness of something doesn’t make it any easier. In fact, whenever race is operating just below the surface, things become explosive.

After I preached that sermon, a long-time member of the new church start in Novi approached the pulpit, dropped his keys to the church on my sermon manuscript and resigned. An emergency meeting was called to vote on whether or not to fire me. Meanwhile, in the city, the opposite response occurred, and people there were suddenly filled with hope that their church

might grow and become integrated.

On the day that we voted whether to stay in Detroit or to sell that landmark church, all three Detroit TV stations were filming the special meeting from the balcony, and both major Detroit newspapers carried the story the next day on the front page and wrote editorials praising our decision not to leave. The vote was as contentious as it was right, and to this day, Bushnell remains at that busy Detroit intersection, although it has struggled to survive.

Meanwhile, the new church was built in Novi, by selling bonds to the entire membership (meaning that in appreciation for the vote not to sell the mother church, we asked the Detroit people to buy bonds to help build the suburban church they would never attend). An either or became a both/and and then I realized that I was in a tough situation. Which church would I pastor, and where would I live? These churches were 25 miles apart, and each needed its own pastor. So I started looking for a way out, and when a small church in Oklahoma City voted to call me to its pulpit, I met with lawyers in Detroit to legally separate the two churches, lest any subsequent mischief occur, and then each began its own search process. In order not to choose, I resigned to become the minister of Mayflower church.

I tell you all this in order to set the stage for how I relate to the parable of the Pharisee and the Publican. Immediately after the vote to stay in Detroit was taken, I decided to institute a Riverside Preacher's series at Bushnell as a way of celebrating the power of preaching and connecting the church to the cathedral of the Liberal Protestant tradition, which is the Riverside Church in the city of New York.

My plan was to have current and former preachers at Riverside come to Bushnell to preach, and invite the entire city to the event. My first invitation, I announced one day, would go to William Sloane Coffin, Jr., and the committee said, "Well, sounds great, but how do you plan to get him to come to here?" I said, "I'll call him." Whereupon I did. I called Riverside church and got the switchboard and said, "Can I speak to Bill Coffin?" Sure, came the answer, and after one ring, he picked up and in his gruff and gravelly voice, said, "Is this King Robin." Apparently news of the vote had reached him.

I laughed a bit nervously and said, "Would you come to Bushnell and preach to us?" "Sure, why not?" he replied, "Let's figure out a date that will work." That's when I thought to myself, "Self, that was easy." I was feeling pretty good about myself, and began to think that all things were possible as long as King Robin willed it — and so I started talking to Bill Coffin about the vote and the response to it, and why it meant so much to me to have him come and that's when he said something I have never forgotten. He said, "Robin, watch that spiritual pride."

What, I thought to myself, is it leaking through the telephone? But that's when I realized

that spiritual pride was not just a problem for fundamentalists. Liberals can be guilty of it as well. Bill Coffin did come to Bushnell, and the next year Jim Forbes came, and then Ernest Campbell the next year, and I was feeling, well, pretty proud. Coffin and Forbes were both overnight guests in our home in Northville, Michigan, and played with our kids (Blue and Chelsea were toddlers at the time). I got an official proclamation from the governor of the state, and the mayor of the city, and after the vote, the headline in the paper read, “Well done, good and faithful servant, well done!” Well, the truth is, I was fairly bursting with spiritual pride.

Then I got invited to have lunch with Jerry Falwell, and as I have related to you I sat there in silence listening to him describe his plan to take America back through the Moral Majority and I kept thinking to myself, “I thank God that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this Baptist preacher. I may not fast twice a week (or even once a week for that matter), but I do make a pledge, I save churches with my golden tongue, and I am bringing together Jews and Gentiles of the present age (blacks and whites) with the redemptive sword of my ministry.”

Of course, I was very humble about it, because all who exalt themselves will be humbled and all who humble themselves will be exalted. You see, I even had an exaltation plan!

The parable of the Pharisee and the publican is a trap. Listen:

He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt. That sounds like introductory material added by the writer of Luke’s gospel, just to make sure we “get it.” And we know who the bad guy is. We love to hate Pharisees, self-righteous do-gooders in long robes who “perform religious acts without being truly religious.” And on the other hand, we are naturally sympathetic to Joe Publican who probably did something really wicked the night before and at least feels really bad about it. “Publican-Publican, he’s our man, if he can’t pour his heart out, no one can!”

But it’s not quite that simple. Listen. “Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector.” The first listeners to this parable would have had an immediate reaction to these two characters, but not necessarily the same one we have today.

We have an image in our mind of the Pharisee, and probably of the tax collector as well. The question is: how accurate are those images? Since we know how the parable ends, with the tax collector going home justified, and the Pharisee praying what sounds like a very arrogant and condescending prayer, it might be wise to dig a little deeper.

Don’t let the title “tax collector” make you think of the kinder, gentler IRS. The Roman

government in those days occupied Palestine; it was a client state under brutal military rule. The Romans had a system for collecting taxes from their subjects, and it involved hiring Jewish tax collectors who went door to door collecting the taxes from their neighbors until they had met their quota. As long as Uncle Rome got what was coming to him, the rest was “don’t ask, don’t tell.” The genius of the plan, however, was that Rome used Jews to collect from their fellow Jews, so the anger would be directed at members of the family, not at the Occupier.

The tax collector made their money the old-fashioned way--just like credit card companies make theirs today, or bankers with sub-prime adjustable rate mortgages or the payday loan industry. They overcharged, or they deceived the client about what was really owed, and they put the extra shekles in their pockets. So make no mistake, hatred of tax collectors was deep and visceral. This is not your ordinary working stiff. This is not Bubba Interrupted. This is a traitor, and the first hearers of the parable would have recoiled at the very mention of a tax collector.

We are at a similar disadvantage when it comes to the present day connotations of Pharisees. Unfortunately, the word Pharisee has come to stand for everything hypocritical and phony in Judaism. We have entered the word into our common vernacular as a synonym for all-show, no-go religion. But the truth is, Jesus got mad at *certain* Pharisees, and so we take this to mean that *all* Pharisees were insufferably self-righteous.

But the Pharisees were, first of all, sincere and committed religious persons who formed the lay-ministry, if you will, of Israel. They were the Deacons of their day, if you will, with better robes and more clout. They were not priests, those were called the Sadducees, but their life was centered in the Temple.

The life of a Pharisee was given over completely to keeping the Law of Moses, and living the oral tradition, in which every conceivable human situation or problem was addressed. He was to live under this law 24 hours a day – even while sleeping – and remember, there were over a thousand laws pertaining to the Sabbath alone. A Pharisee’s job was to see to it that others lived in accordance with these laws also. And they had daily rituals that were *required* of them, including this prayer.

When we first hear it, especially in the context of how the parable ends, it’s easy to dismiss it as utterly self-righteous: “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.”

This is what we might call a “stock prayer,” taught to Pharisees, which they recited every day. It was not something he came up with in a fit of self-righteousness or self-aggrandizement.

It's purpose was to express gratitude at having been saved from all this wickedness by faith and by commitment to the law.

So before we come down too hard on the Pharisee, and champion the tax collector as every man, let's ask ourselves honestly what would become of the church if we had no Pharisees in it. "I give a tenth of everything I get." That's called "tithing," and let's face it, if everyone of us in this church gave a tenth of everything we've got; there would be no more fund-raisers of any kind because we would be rolling in dough.

It's almost November, folks, and that means it's "stewardship" time. You will soon get a letter from the Chair of the Board of Trustees asking you to support Mayflower, but I can assure you there will be nothing about tithing in that letter. Because if you tithed, like a good Pharisee, there would be no need to even send out the letter. You would give out of compulsion, every day when you stopped by Mayflower to pray morning, noon, and night.

The Pharisee goes on to say that he does not steal, commit adultery, and that he fasts twice a week. Let's take him at his word and admit that whatever else we may find to criticize in his approach to religion; he is a man whose religious discipline puts us to shame. Most churches look for Pharisees when they are putting together their boards and committees, not publicans.

The tax collector on the other hand, stands off by himself in shame, and prays a weeping, desperate prayer over his sin. He literally pleads for forgiveness and mercy. And Jesus says that his plea was heard and that he went home justified, while the Pharisee did not. So here is the strange situation that we confront. We have a person whose life can be applauded, but whose attitude is offensive, while on the other hand we have a person whose life is offensive, but whose attitude is judged to be worthwhile, even vindicated.

If we stand over against the Pharisee, it seems like we are saying that only attitude is important, and behavior doesn't matter – and nobody wants to say that. But if we stand over against the tax collector, it seems like we are not in favor of humility and penitence – and nobody wants to say that.

Wouldn't it be nice if we could have the humility of the publican and the behavior of the Pharisee all rolled up into one man? It would be nice, but it's not what we have. In the end, Jesus seems to be saying that he finds honest confrontation with one's own sin to be more important than a life of admirable, though judgmental self-righteousness. And if that's true, just think what it means in terms of the way we think of religious people today?

It is a constant theme in the gospel of Luke for Jesus to be lifting up people who are

normally thought to be powerless and beyond redemption. Luke wants us to know that it is never too late to enter the kingdom, for God is a God of infinite patience, who stands ready to forgive the truly repentant, and welcome them home. But it must be an honest repentance, an honest confession, an honest confrontation with our true desires and our fundamental separation from God. Forgive me Father for I drive a Hummer, don't even know my neighbors, and tithe only to my retirement fund.

I mean let's be honest about repentance. It has gotten to be a rather foreign notion, hasn't it? I mean, really, when was the last time any one of us "repented," in the old sense of that word? Felt deeply sorry toward God, and (since the Greek word means literally to "turn" from our present life), to ask for strength to lead a new one? This is not popular, especially not in the enlightened mainline church. Catholics repent; well-educated Protestants get therapy.

And yet Jesus seems to be telling us, in this parable, that it is not just our behavior that matters to God, but a certain level of honesty about ourselves. Strange as it sounds, the path to God is shorter for a penitent sinner than for a righteous and respectable man who goes through life behaving in outwardly admirable ways, but who is quick to remind God that he is superior to others. In other words, "watch that spiritual pride!"

You remember pride, the first of the seven deadly sins — first because it is the mother and father of all the other sins? Apparently, Jesus also considers it one of the primary obstacles to the life of faith. And even this gets tricky, since there are people who are falsely modest, or to put it in my earlier phrase, they have an exaltation plan. I actually knew a minister once who preached a sermon on humility, and then stood at the door and asked people to rate it on a scale of one to ten — hoping they would tell him, in their humble opinion, what a great sermon he had just preached on humility!

This parable reminds me that one of the most dangerous things I can do as a Christian is to be constantly comparing myself with other people in order to make myself feel better. Because if God grades on the curve, then I think we will all pass. And the words of the *Desiderata* say it plainly: "If you compare yourself with others, you may become vain or bitter; for always there will be greater and lesser persons than yourself."

Because the problem we face in our religious life is not just "how is it between me and God?" But "how is it between myself and the other person?" Especially that "other" person whom I am quick to judge, but whose life I really know nothing about.

I know this. Jesus is not recommending the ways of the publican, any more than he is suggesting that the piety of the Pharisee counts for nothing. He's telling us to stop praying with one eye open, as we look across the room at some notorious sinner and revel in our superiority.

When I play that game – and we all play it – the “I’m-not-perfect-but-I’m-sure-better-than-you-are-game” - I put up a barrier between myself and God that ends up hurting me more than a truly penitent person’s past hurts him. Now that’s a shocking idea.

It reminds me of the story of Jonah, which is not really a story about whether anyone can really survive three days in the belly of a great fish, but whether any of us can survive being swallowed by pride. You know the story. It’s a powerful story about running away from God. We all do it and Jonah works particularly hard at it — ending up in the belly of a sea monster at the bottom of the sea — which if you are a Jew and the sea is the abode of chaos and death is about as far away from God as you can get.

Even there God gets through, drills all the way down like we did to reach those trapped miners and says, “Jonah.” I always imagine him saying, “Gees, what’s a guy got to do to get away!”

Then in the brilliant imagery of a story written by people who didn’t worry about whether or not you took it literally, (only whether you got it), the fish vomits him up on dry land right in the middle of the land of his enemy — in Nineveh, surrounded by Arabs, who are even worse than tax collectors. And God says, “Preach to them.”

And Jonah doesn’t find this idea very appealing. So he sits under a little bush for shade, and he pouts. What’s the matter Jonah? God asks. Why are you pouting? And Jonah says, in effect, “I’m pouting because I know what will happen if I preach to these people about you. Some of them will turn from their wicked ways, and embrace you. And you will forgive them, and love them, and that makes me sick.”

We need our enemies. Liberals and Conservatives alike need their enemies. Because if we get to know other people too well, we will discover not how different they are from us, but how much like us they are. And then the world we think we know – the world of us and them – will fall apart — and it will only be us and us. In fact, Jonah is afraid of something very strange, and we are afraid of it in the church to this day – the wideness of God’s mercy, the maddening breadth of God’s love. So he takes God to court, and this is his charge against God: “You always abound in steadfast love and mercy.”

So here’s the funny thing about this parable, but it’s not so funny really. When I hear it, I realize that I am offended by the attitude of the Pharisee, and by the life of the Publican, which really means that I have been condescending to both of them. And so where does that leave me? I’m much more like the Pharisee than the Publican leading worship, writing books, making sure

that people know that I'm not like the Religious Right.

I've got advanced degrees and diplomas to prove it; I've got a curriculum vita that I update regularly but have never shortened. I've got more speaking engagements that I can handle, and now I'm a member of the *Jesus Seminar* – pretty cool, huh – not like other men, uneducated, superstitious, without a book contract to their name.

I fast from fast food twice a week, and do *not* give a tenth of my income away, but I'm working on it — but I do give on-line. I use the little green voucher, not like other men and women who refuse to get with it. And to be honest, I thank God every day that nobody in my church is a member of the Tea Party (at least that I know of), and while we're at it, I do have nightmares that Mary Fallin might be the next governor of Oklahoma. In fact, I have lots of nightmares these days about the future of our democracy, which seems to have a death wish.

And then God says, "Robin, watch that spiritual pride."

That's when Shawn says, "Robin, did you hear that?"

And I say, "Hear what?"



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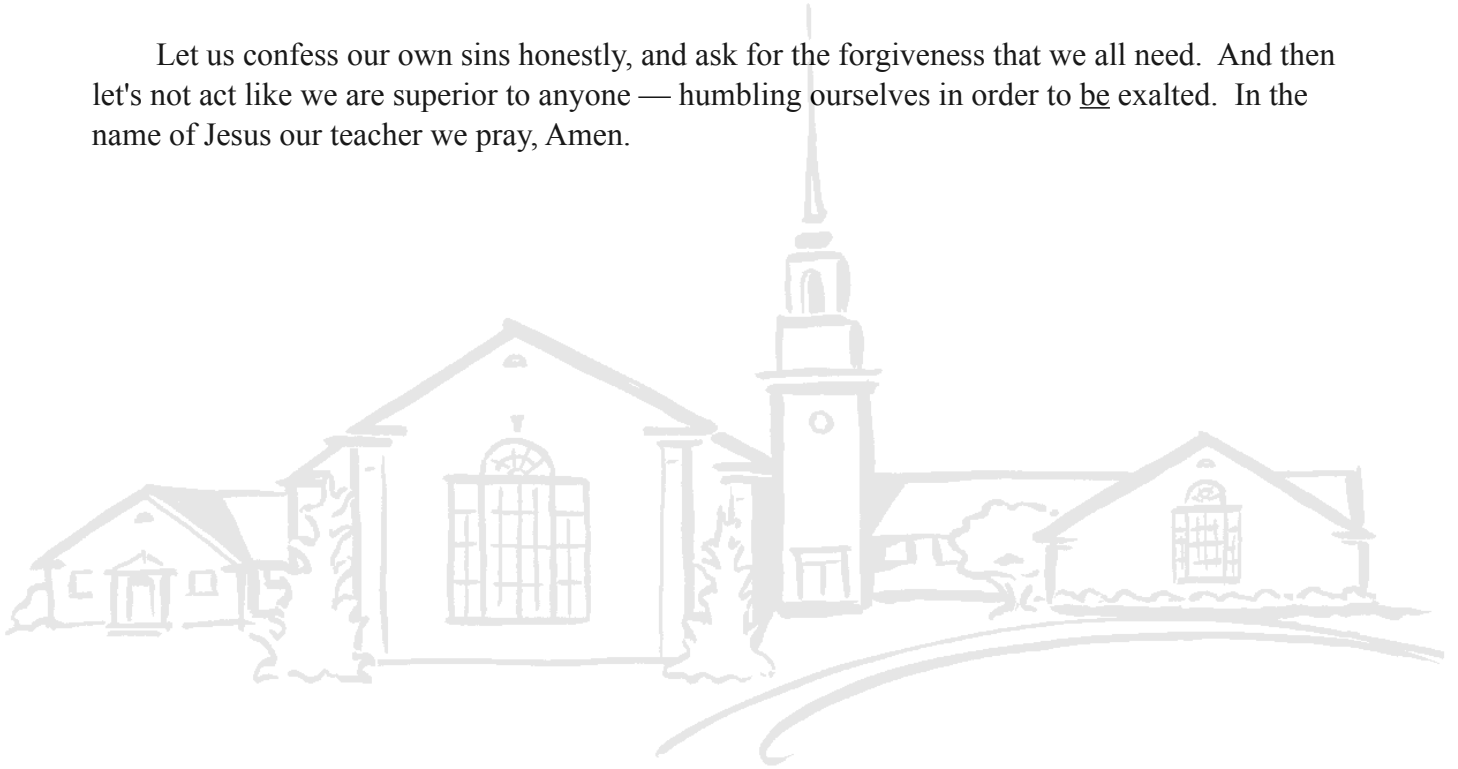
Pastoral Prayer for Sunday, October 24, 2010

Lord of Life, we pray for strength and for wisdom in these days and for humility as well. We do not have all the answers, and we do not have perfect knowledge of anything. So we come to this place to remember that we live by grace, and not by pride and power. We come knowing that the future is uncertain, but we do not wish to live by fear, for the heat of the gospel is to "fear not."

Help us not to turn one against another, for the hatred which hangs over our time can be bought and sold and the world can be too easily divided up between good and evil. What's more,

we know that to You our categories always fall short, and our perceptions of the world are limited and tinged with vanity. So our prayer this morning is for all of humankind, both those we know and love in their struggles, and those we have never met, and will never meet, whose struggles are just as real, and whose lives are just as precious.

Let us confess our own sins honestly, and ask for the forgiveness that we all need. And then let's not act like we are superior to anyone — humbling ourselves in order to be exalted. In the name of Jesus our teacher we pray, Amen.



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