

It's Hard to be Humble

Joel 2:23-32

Crossroads Christian Church

Luke 18:9-14 October 23, 2016 23rd Sunday after Pentecost

My sermon title today comes from a 1980 hit by Mac Davis.

"Oh Lord it's hard to be humble
When you're perfect in every way.
I can't wait
To look in the mirror.
Cause I get better looking each day.
To know me is to love me.
I must be a heck of a man.
Oh Lord It's hard to be humble,
But I'm doing the best that I can."¹

That's just the chorus. The rest of the song goes on, tongue in cheek, to describe how wonderful the singer is. Clearly this singer doesn't struggle with a lack of self-esteem. I've always found it fun to joke about humility, because I have a lot to be humble about. Of all the spiritual disciplines, humility is what I do best—I'm an expert on humility, I say in all humility, of course.

That being established, let's look again at that very familiar parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector—or, as it was called in the Bibles of our childhood, the Pharisee and the publican. We've heard a lot of the parables of Jesus over the last few months. First of all, let's identify who Jesus is talking to. He's addressing people "who have convinced themselves that they were righteous and looked down upon everybody else with disgust." (v.9) Sort of sounds like political ads. "Elect me because I'm a true patriot. Don't vote for my opponent, who is a disgusting slime ball." Anyway, Jesus was addressing people that we would call "holier-than-thou." In this parable he's trying to afflict the comfortable, not comfort the afflicted. Two men go to the temple to pray. The first is a Pharisee. Like I said before, the Pharisees were the ancient Jewish version of the kind of folks we like to have as church members—they're devoted to their faith, they follow all the rules, they tithe, they go to Bible study, what's not to like, right? The Pharisee stood and prayed about himself—maybe his favorite subject. "God, I thank you that I'm not like everyone else—crooks, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week. I give a tenth of everything I receive." He's giving himself a spiritual self-examination, and grading himself an A+ --especially in comparison to the tax collector who really shouldn't even be in the temple in the first place. We don't usually allow that kind in here.

¹¹ Mac Davis, "It's Hard to be Humble," quoted on metrolyrics.com

He had a point. Tax collectors back then weren't just government bureaucrats who made your life difficult on April 15. The taxes they collected were paid to the Roman government. They were employees of the Roman Empire, and the Roman empire ruled Judea, like all its other colonies, with an iron fist. The tax collectors were traitors in their own land, agents of their oppressors. On top of that, tax collectors were paid a percentage of the taxes they collected, so the more they extorted, the more they earned. Good, honest people considered them as weasels; rats; vermin scum of the earth.

So it was no wonder that the tax collector standing in the temple felt the weight of all this judgment, all this condemnation, all this hatred upon his shoulders. He stood in the corner, beat his chest in guilt and self-loathing, and said, "God, show mercy to me, a sinner." And Jesus said that the tax collector, not the Pharisee, went home justified in the eyes of God.

We nod in agreement with Jesus, because Jesus said it, and we prefer humility and honesty to pride and vanity. But to the people who first heard it, the good community leaders, must have experienced whiplash because they did such a double take. "We play by God's rules. We're honest. We give to the poor. We uphold the standards of our community. We love our families. We have earned God's love and acceptance. How could God possibly justify the life of one who has forsaken his nation and extorted the hard-earned money of rich and poor alike? What could Jesus possibly mean?"

Anthony F.M. Clavier puts it this way: "So when Jesus approves of the Publican, the tax-gatherer, one can imagine the shock that went through his hearers. It would be as if he'd singled out someone who has ruined people with a Ponzi scheme, and now enters our church and professes repentance in the company of those defrauded. If we are to be polled, we'll vote to approve of a self-righteous but upright person over a swindler and a crook."² (unquote)

Now it's easy at this point to say that this parable doesn't apply to us, because we're not Pharisees, filled with self-pride, nor are we turncoat tax collectors. But that's too easy. We know that we've looked down our nose at others whom we see as less deserving than ourselves. We know that we wouldn't want to be judged by the same standards that we use to judge the poor people around us whose way of life seems inferior to our own. When Sandy and I were a young married couple, we decided to become foster parents. The county gave us a sweet little 9-month-old girl, and the paperwork to cover her medical expenses. We went to the drugstore to get medicine for her, showed the paperwork, and the clerk yelled back across the store, with other people present. "It's another one of those welfare

² The Rev. Anthony Clavier, "Are We Like the Righteous Man?" episcopaldigitalnetwork.com

cases." We were trying to do something good, and we were judged as being "another one of those."

Jesus is telling us not to be arrogant, but to be humble. There's an interesting background to that word. It's related to the word humus, for dirt or soil. Genesis 2 says that we were formed out of the soil of the earth, and humility is just a way we acknowledge that reality. Humus. Humility. Human.

Jesus is telling us that we don't have to impress God with our own achievements. Brownie points, no matter how many we accumulate, won't get us into heaven. God loves us for who we are, not who we pretend to be. All those little fears, foibles and failures, all those secrets that we like to keep hidden from ourselves, God knows them and loves us anyway. It's all about grace and forgiveness, not about what teachers may have written on our permanent record, or even about what may be on our arrest record. Like the repentant thief on the cross next to Jesus, it's all about grace and forgiveness.

And that's the thing about that miserable tax collector. He knew that he had done wrong. He knew that he wasn't worthy. He knew that he had blown away all his values in search of a good income. He didn't have any pretensions. He knew what other people thought of him. Yet he knew enough to call upon merciful to him. And that's all that counted.

Jesus then told the point of the parable: "All who lift themselves up will be brought low, and those who make themselves low will be lifted up." (v. 14) Maybe he got that from his mom. Mary, when she praised God for being the one who would bring Jesus into the world, said, "He has pulled the powerful down from their thrones and lifted up the lowly. He has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty-handed." (Luke 1:52-53) Jesus turned the world's values upside down.

Our Gospel lesson ended with that line "All who lift themselves up will be brought low, and those who make themselves low will be lifted up." But I think that Luke and Jesus wouldn't want to stop there. I think that Jesus was building upon the same theme when he said, "Allow the children to come to me. Don't forbid them, because God's kingdom belongs to people like these children. I assure you that whoever doesn't welcome God's kingdom like a child will never enter it." Like children, we rely on others to get by, whether we admit it or not. Infants are completely dependent upon their parents to survive. Likewise, we are completely dependent on our heavenly parent. When we're "down-to-earth" people, we know the true meaning of being blessed, for it was Jesus who said, "Happy are people who are humble, for they will inherit the earth." (Matthew 5:5) So be kind. Be gentle. Be forgiving. Be slow to judge, and quick to pardon. And you will be a child of God. Amen.

By Michael E. Dixon