

Luke 18:9-14

“When Up is Down”

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

10“Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. 11The 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. 12I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.’

13But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’

14I 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.”

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When I was 20 years old, I learned what has probably proven to be the most valuable wisdom for my Christian faith. It was in a conversation with my spiritual mentor -- an extraordinary Swedish Lutheran woman. She had that “Jesus way” of asking questions that cut to where the spirit meets the bone.

After returning from a profoundly transformative summer working in rural Mississippi, I met with Carla to unpack what I had experienced. I had seen for the first time in my life unspeakable poverty and blatant systemic racism. I returned to my college in Seattle intent on becoming a more “seriously-minded Christian” — one who would live out her faith in the real world, working against systems of injustice. My eyes had been opened! I was compelled to integrate my newly discovered zeal. Yet, as I told Carla my desire, she seemed to pull back from my enthusiasm. She said, “Clover, I think you are too concerned with how to DO Christianity. Being a Christian isn’t about getting all the doctrines right or performing admirable deeds or taking political stances or embracing the right convictions so that God and others will admire you. Faith is not about how you *present* yourself to the world. Being a person of faith is about *knowing* God. That’s what we’re called to do. To Know God.”

So I’m going to cut this Pharisee some slack because it seems to me that we all have a little Pharisee in us. We have our own measurements for being righteous. Pharisees get a bad rap. They were the Jews who worked hard at obeying every minutia of the Law. They exhibited an intense desire to fulfill God’s commands.

This well meaning, earnest Pharisee went up to the altar above the crowd. In case God did not remember, he reminded God about all he did right. He tithed 10% of his earnings, just as the Law commanded.

(By the way, since we are midway through Stewardship season, and even though I am averse to stewardship sermons, I would be irresponsible if I didn't encourage you to join the many who pledge to give a portion of what they have to the work of this church. Tithing in fact is very honorable and the faithful stewardship team and the leadership encourage you to give generously. Simply, Living with open hands and open hearts is good for your spiritual health. And, YOUR giving helps THIS church remain spiritually healthy too. Ok. There. Done. That's the entirety of my stewardship sermon.)

Back to our story. This most excellent Pharisee reminded God that he was taking care of his spiritual life and honoring God by fasting twice a week. In addition, he pointed out that he was not like so many of those "others" that he was confident God despised as much as he did: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even the tax collector behind him.

Sacrificial giving and generosity. Check.

Attending to his spiritual life through fasting and prayer. Check.

Not like the deplorables. Check.

Yet, while at the altar reciting his worthiness, the Pharisee's attention was drawn toward the disreputable guy standing behind him. He couldn't help but hear the fuss the tax collector was making. Beating his chest, begging for mercy.

Quickly a tightness surfaced in the Pharisee's face. He looked down his nose. He pursed his lips. Raised an eyebrow and rolled his eyes ever so subtly. You know how you get when you feel morally superior to someone. I know I do! I smugly think, Thank GOD I am not like him or her. But notice: *in that flash of thought, that look down the nose, something changed. A wall is erected and fortified.*

Each of us is as tempted as the Pharisee to glance around, to look sideways for another person and his or her shortcomings or sins or just what a general jerk he or she is. It's incredibly easy to feel better about ourselves based on how we measure up against each other, especially those we are not in real relationship with. This political season minute by minute is offering us tons of reasons for our own moral superiority.

But what are we really doing when we do that? Do we really think we're so far superior? Or are we looking for a way of looking away from *ourselves*, from our own weaknesses, our own failings, our own inadequacies? I'd rather be appalled by white supremacists and their horrifying words so I can feel a little less badly about my own racist thoughts. I'd rather be distracted by Brad and Angelina's marital problems than look at my own.

What's so amazing and masterful about Jesus' parables is that they leave us befuddled, wondering which character in the story we are supposed to identify with.

We humans seem to be set up to identify with the one who at first glance appears to be the moral hero -- in this case the one too humble to approach the altar.

But parables are meant to turn us inside out, because guess what? There is no "moral" to the story.

Lutheran theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, said that the *Gospel is frankly hard for the pious to understand*. Because the Gospel confronts us with the truth saying you are a sinner, a great and desperate sinner just like everyone else. Now come as the sinner you are to the God who loves you utterly.

It's hard for the pious to understand that the ethics or political commitments we hold so dearly can be stumbling blocks to this relationship.

And this doesn't apply only to the "Conservative Right" and their versions of purity codes: sexuality, abortion, second amendment rights, or particular political viewpoints, and so on.

The "Progressive Left" has its own purity codes: driving our hybrid cars, eating organically, avoiding Walmart, voting yes on the right referendums, and so on. All of it—as right and good as it might be — is at risk of becoming a block to a genuine relationship with God, and certainly a barrier to our relationship with others.

When I was a college chaplain, a student told me about his Southern Baptist grandfather with whom he was very close growing up. The grandfather adored his grandson. He was a lovely, funny, gentle child. His grandson came out in college as a gay man. The grandfather couldn't handle it. Homosexuality went against his deeply held religious convictions. Even though he loved his grandson, he told him that based on his principles, if he accepted him, he would be condoning his grandson's behavior. Sadly, their relationship went from warm to politely cool; from close to painfully distant.

The grandfather held up his principles over the real human relationship with the boy he loved! The grandfather was looking sideways, more concerned about how God and others would judge HIM, unwilling at least question his own convictions in order to stay in relationship with his grandson which I believe is what God always calls us to do.

When we place our belief system before compassion, we stumble over the very good news of the Gospel! For the Gospel proclaims we are all in this together AND it's a level playing field when it comes to sin. None of us has to work harder at earning grace.

We don't need to grovel and beat our chests and to cast down our eyes to get God's attention. As my wise mother in law puts it, each of us only needs to have an "honest estimation of ourselves."

Ishmael in Melville's *Moby Dick* described us like this:

"I say, we good Presbyterian Christians should be charitable . . . and not fancy ourselves so vastly superior to other mortals, pagans and what not; . . . I say: and Heaven have mercy on us all – Presbyterians and Pagans alike – for we are all somehow dreadfully cracked about the head, and sadly need mending."

It's easy to reduce the parable today to a simple story about humility as the way to righteousness. But Jesus traps his listeners. As soon as we ourselves judge the Pharisee for being self-righteous, we become the Pharisee. It's a self-perpetuating cycle-- because we are all cracked about the head.

As the singer songwriter Leonard Cohen puts it, "Ring the bells that still can ring; Forget your perfect offering; There is a crack in everything; That's how the light gets in."

Could it be that the peril in our drive to be good, to be pure, to be whole, to be whatever we are NOT, is fortifying a wall between us and our God, our loved ones and even ourselves?

Our righteousness, our goodness, might become the very enemies to our growth as full humans--as persons of love and authenticity.

This parable is NOT about the self-righteous Pharisee. It's NOT about the humble tax collector.

It's about our GOD who is merciful; our God who continually draws our attention away from ourselves –sinner or saint--and our focus away from others, and instead summons us to feast our eyes upon the gaze of a God who offers ALL unearned grace and mercy.

May God protect us from even Our very best selves.

May we offer ourselves as cracked bells—or cracked heads-- so that God's light might get in.