

October 28, 2007

“Humbled”

Luke 18:9-14

Jesus told stories relating to his purpose in being on earth. Just as his miracles were signs of God’s power in the midst of creation; working with bread and water, lame bodies and untamed spirits, he told parables to share the message that he had come to raise the dead. Jesus repeatedly drew his listeners back to the One who gave us life in the first place, the one who will also grant life to us, once again.

This being said, raising the stakes of the importance of his words to us, the stories that Jesus told are incredibly fascinating in their own right.

So read this parable of Jesus: Luke 18:9-14

He 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 look up 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.”

Today is Reformation Sunday- that’s why John Calvin’s portrait graces the cover of our bulletin. This is the time of year we in the church recognize that Martin Luther nailed his 95 protest statements to the church door in Wittenberg, Germany, in 1517. He did so to begin a conversation, which led to a disagreement, which led to a revolution of thought and belief throughout Europe and around the world. And, as it is said, Luther began the disagreement that John Calvin later codified, putting the arguments into points of policy and doctrine in his famous Institutes of the Christian Religion.

We Presbyterians are all children of this process, a period of time in which the Bible itself was reexamined anew. Instead of using scripture as a rote tool of ceremony, the content and context of Jesus’ words were brought by the Reformers into everyday living, to share the truth that Jesus came to raise the dead- in more ways than we imagine.

So, this past week I have gone back to the Reformation, in my own way, and have read through John Calvin’s commentary on Luke’s Gospel, on this parable Jesus told.

Reading a lot of Calvin this week has reminded me just how stark and iconoclastic the Reformers were in their understanding of scripture: how through dogged scholarship they were able to strip the Gospel message down to the bare bones to leap the centuries and make it perk up, confound and sting listeners’ ears, just as surely as it did to Jesus’ original audience.

The first thing to say about Jesus’ parable is to get it out of our heads that this is a lesson

in devout living. It is not. I've got to agree with Calvin that this story is an instruction on the futility of religion; that is- the bankrupt notion that there is anything you can *do* to put yourself right with God. It is folly even to try. There is no greater hallmark of the Reformation- of our common faith- than the firm conviction that we are saved by grace alone. By Grace Alone. This parable tells us something of the nature of those who recognize grace in their lives and who see in it the very gift of life, for now and always.

This parable is positioned in Luke's gospel after a series of illustrations of what Jesus means by faith, and it comes shortly before he announces, for the third time, that he will die and rise again. The whole message is about accountability- to God. It is not how we rank over against one another. Our relationship with God does not depend on the goodness or badness of other people. This is a story that brings us to the central point of the gospel: of faith in a God who raises the dead.

Consider the characters in the parable.

Forget all the prejudice you've formed in your mind about Pharisees. Give this particular Pharisee all the credit you can. He is, after all, a good man. He is not a thief, he takes nothing he hasn't honestly earned, he gives everyone he knows their due and more, he is religiously observant and contributes his fair share to worthy causes. He is not at all like the tax collector who *is* a thief, and the very worst kind—a legal one.

This tax collector had a franchise, an area in which he was entitled to collect taxes. He was a Jew who worked for the Roman government to gather- from people the Romans themselves might have trouble finding, but whose whereabouts he knows and whose language he speaks- all the money he can bleed out of them, provided he pays the authorities an agreed flat fee. He has been living for years on the cream he has skimmed off their milk money. Tax collectors were despised as traitors.

The Pharisee however, is not only good, he is religious; and not hypocritically religious either. His outward uprightness is matched by an inward discipline. He fasts twice a week and puts his money where his mouth is: ten percent off the top for God. (If you know where to find a dozen or two such upstanding citizens, I know a lot of congregations that will accept delivery of them, no questions asked and all of Jesus' parables notwithstanding.)

And this Pharisee thanks God for his happy situation; that he's fortunate, not like others- with lesser morals and weaker wills and thinner wallets- and that he can and does live a righteous life. That is his speech. He goes on and on like that.

Then the tax collector says (he won't look up to the heavens; he looks down at his shoe tips), "God be merciful to me a sinner."

And Jesus says, "I tell you this man (the tax collector) went to his house justified rather than the other, for all who exalt themselves will be humbled and all who humble themselves will be exalted."

***That's the story. Like all of Jesus' parables, this should carry a warning which is "this***

***will be hazardous to all your previous opinions about how religion works and how God works." Jesus' parables are designed to stun and shock and to show how God has stood almost all of our values on their heads.***

Efforts at morality, humility, spirituality and, above all, efforts at religion, are efforts at trying to do something that will get us right with God. All don't work. So God, as Jesus informs us, doesn't risk trying to save the world by human good behavior.

Jesus came to raise the dead. He did not come to teach the teachable; He did not come to improve the improvable; He did not come to reform the reformable. None of those things work. Jesus taught His disciples for three years. They never caught on to very much at all. God has been teaching the world for millennia. The world hasn't done anything much about it. Tragedies go on. Lies go on. Hypocrisy and posturing and rivalry and all the things that are wrong with the world go on. They are not responsive to talk.

They are only responsive to action and, therefore, Jesus came to raise the dead -- meaning by deadness, you in your deadness, the Pharisee in his deadness and the tax collector in his deadness.

Now I need to ask you a question. Do you understand and agree with this parable? It is hard, for sure. This story violates every sense you and I have about the fact that basically we're really doing fairly well, and if only other people were as nice and considerate and as wonderful as we are, the world would be a better place to live-- and to that God says, "No. That does not work, never has." It can't be done that way.

The world cannot and will not be made right by people who think they are winners. It can only be done by people who are willing to admit they are lost and then are willing to trust God to deliver them the gift of life.

God works in the lostness of the world. What that means, the reason we fear it so much, is that it means in the long run that death is catholic. Death is universal. Death gets us all, and if death is the only ticket anyone needs into life with Jesus and if everybody has that ticket, then, perhaps, God has no taste. God is indiscriminate. All we have to do is believe in God's love in Christ Jesus, and not earn it.

Thus we have a God, in Jesus' proclamation, who does not abide by our rules.

As Calvin tells us, as long as you are struggling like the Pharisee to be good and productive- and precisely to the degree that you are struggling for what is holy, just, and good- you will resent the apparent indifference to your pains that God shows in accepting the simple, transparent confession need of the need for mercy by the tax collector.

Only when you are finally able, along with the tax collector, to admit that on your own you are dead will you be able to stop balking at grace.

It is, admittedly, a terrifying step. You will kick and cry and scream before you take it, because it means putting yourself out of the only game any of us knows.

For your comfort, though, I can tell you three things. First, it is only one step. Second, it is not a step out of reality into nothing, but a step from fiction into fact. And third, it will make you laugh out loud at how short the trip home is: because it isn't a trip at all— you are already there.

Amen.