

***Humility: Life's Longest Lesson***

*a sermon preached by the Rev. Scott Dalgarno on Oct. 23, 2022*

*based on Luke 18:9-14*

Queen Elizabeth's passing reminded me of a story told about her from 40 years ago that is surely apocryphal but true to her majesty's wit nevertheless.

An elderly British gentleman goes into a second-hand store in London. He browses and finds a sharp looking officer's uniform. Perusing a jewelry case, he finds a gorgeous collection of medals. He doesn't know what they stand for but they impress the heck out of him, so he puts them on the uniform and joins a tour of Buckingham Palace on Armistice day. And because the medals signify high rank and splendid performance he finds himself whisked into the Queen's receiving line.

He's introduced to the Queen, who, looking carefully at the medals says, "Colonel, I see by this medal that you have served your queen and country for 40 years. He nods.

"And let's see, by this I see that you began your service as an infantry officer."

"And this tells me that you distinguished yourself in World War II." He nods again.

"And, I see by this decoration that you were killed in action on the island of Crete . . . Pity."

As Luke tells the story of the Pharisee and the tax collector he focuses on the Pharisee, a man who wears his righteousness in public like the soldier in the story wears his medals.

In the preface to today's text it says, "[Jesus] told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt . . ."

I propose we take a fresh look at this parable. There may, in fact, be more here than Luke himself realized. Who knows?

Here is what I mean: What is so bad about this Pharisee, anyway? He is just the kind of person every church depends upon. He's the one who pays the bills. He's the one who answers up when it comes time to recruit new members of our boards. He's the overworked Deacon who is out there three afternoons a week calling on the shut-ins.

He's not only good to his church and to other people, he is genuinely spiritual. He prays, he fasts so as to feel the hunger of the involuntary hungry.

He probably sang "Amazing Grace" on his way up to the temple that morning, getting misty eyed. He FEELS this stuff.

He even puts his money where his mouth is. He tithes 10% off the top. Any good Presbyterian would love to have a dozen more just like him in their church.

And what's so good about this tax collector? He's a crook. The worst kind of crook: a legal one; a white collar crook who is constantly gouging everybody.

He's like a mafia man who has an agreement with the government to skim as much as he can off the populace as long as the government gets its take. He's got the shadiest little franchise going. And what is he going to do tomorrow after beating his breast in the temple for a few minutes?

There is nothing in the text that would lead us to believe that he would do anything except go right back out there the next day and gouge more poor people.

So . . . to see the tax collector as honorable and the Pharisee as a creep makes the story false. It is to turn it into a cheap morality tale and lands us in the trap of saying, "God, I thank you that I am not like this Pharisee."

The Pharisee's prayer is a prayer of gratitude - a classic Jewish prayer that thanks God for one's blessings and blessedness. It is a fine prayer . . . until he gets to one point.

He doesn't give thanks that God has spared him being born into **circumstances** that would tempt him to become a thief, a rogue, or tax collector.

No, he gives thanks that he is not LIKE them. "God, I thank you that I am not LIKE other people."

Here he crosses the line from the grammar of gratitude to the grammar of elitism. It's very subtle, so subtle that it is insidious. It is something we ALL fall into when we use US / THEM language.

You can FEEL that elitism when he says: "Thank you God, that I am not like THIS tax collector.

At this point he is no longer praying, he is peeking. He is looking around for a standard to measure himself against.

"Oh yes," he says, "I certainly am lots better than that man over there; heavens!"

And had the tax collector measured *himself* against the Pharisee and despaired at the difference, **his** prayer would have been just as false.

The tax collector, wrong as he is about so much, is at least praying an honest prayer. He doesn't even notice the Pharisee because it says he is "standing afar off" entirely lost in his humble prayer.

Jesus says, this tax collector "would not even look up to heaven when he prayed."

Both men pray about themselves, but one of them is scanning the room, while the other is oblivious to all but his own wretched heart.

This is a parable about a one-word condition: SMUGNESS.

Now, let's see if we can bring this parable up to date:

Think of the Pharisee as a modern day ENVIRONMENTALIST who is always wearing green and who is forever using his *Nextdoor* app to say to his neighbors:

"I recycle everything. I was the first on my block to recycle. Not a scrap of paper in my house ever goes into the garbage can. Come around back. You can see my compost pile. I never drive where I can bike or walk. In fact, I'd bike 300 miles to find a recycling center that would take a #7 plastic jug before I'd throw it out. I'm so glad I don't abuse the earth like **some** people."

Smugness. Jesus knows us through and through. He knows the human condition so well: His words on this in Matthew's gospel are revealing:

"You have heard that it was said to those in ancient times, 'You shall not murder'; and 'whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.' But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment. . . . : "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart."

Now . . . do you think Jesus says this because he loves to come down on people? No, he knows how SMUG we can be, and how likely we are to compare ourselves to each other.

He is saying, "Be careful about comparing yourself against others ethically. The seeds of murder and adultery live in us all, every one of us."

Look at another a seminal story in our tradition: the one about Adam and Eve's children, Cain and Abel. Cain and Abel, if you remember, both take offerings to God,

and for some reason that isn't even mentioned, God accepts Abel's offering but not Cain's. Cain feels slighted, and his jealousy shows on his face.

God comes to earth in this tale and says to Cain: "Why has your countenance fallen? You know, Cain, it's simple: Some days you win and some days you lose, and one should not take winning or losing too seriously. Good and bad luck; they're just random. "So look, Cain," says God, "sin is like a beast of prey: it lies crouching at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it."

The lesson here is simple, -- if things are working out well for you -- be careful -- you're prone to the sin of pride. And if things go badly for you, be careful -- you will be prone to jealousy. Either way, it's a slippery slope.

Self-examination is always called for. We need to be vigilant; as vigilant as Cain wasn't.

Cain was merely reactive. He fell prey to his own jealousy. He was NOT thoughtful.

We need to be careful of smugness; of peeping, of finger pointing --

My take is that this is one of the most important lessons in life; that God is always working on us in this area.

Here is my Exhibit A on that . . .

William Willimon, now a Methodist bishop, remembers a new member drive organized in the small congregation he was serving many years ago. Groups of two were sent out on a Sunday afternoon with a city map and assigned neighborhoods to knock on doors and invite people to church. One elderly couple took their street map, turned left instead of right, and ended up in the "wrong" neighborhood.

When they returned to report, Helen and Gladys said they had discovered a real prospect, Verleen, who, indeed, not only showed up the next Sunday but signed up for the woman's Bible study which Rev. Willimon led himself.

The topic was temptation, and Rev. Willimon began by asking, "Have any of you been faced with temptation and, with Jesus' help, resisted?" The responses were pretty mild:

One woman confessed that she had been tempted to keep a loaf of bread the supermarket checkout clerk had neglected to charge her for.

There were a few similar responses, then Verleen spoke up: "A couple of years ago, I was into cocaine real big. . . . You know how that stuff makes you crazy. Well, anyway, my boyfriend—we knocked over a gas station. We got \$200. . . . Then he says to me, 'Let's knock over the Seven-Eleven.' And something says to me, 'No, I've held up the gas

station with you, but no convenience store. He beat me . . . but I still said no. It felt great to say no. . . . Made me feel like somebody.”

Rev. Willimon remembers that after he recovered, he mumbled something like, “Well, that’s certainly resisting temptation.”

Later, in the parking lot, as he was helping Helen, one of the longtime group members to her car, Helen said to him, “I can’t wait to get home and get on the phone. Your Bible studies used to be so dull. I think we could get a crowd for this.”

Rev. Willimon reflects, “Time and time again in our life together, just when we get everything figured out, the pews all bolted down and everyone blissfully adjusted to the status quo, God intrudes, inserts someone like Verleen into our midst, just to remind us that God is large, unmanageable, and full of surprises,” (William Willimon, *The Intrusive Word*, cited by Michael Lindvall in *A Geography of God*).

The Vietnamese Buddhist teacher, Thich Nhat Hanh has said, “We are on this earth for one purpose: to wake up from the illusion of our own separateness.”

It’s time for me to close this, but instead of me just harping on how we need to be careful about smugness, let me, instead, close with something that might inspire us all to think outside the boxes we live in. It will give us something to shoot for. It’s told by Joseph Slevcove of San Diego,

*When my wife, Beth, and I moved from the suburbs to a warehouse loft in the center of a large city, Beth embraced every aspect of urban life — even the sirens, the parking problems, and the car alarms at night. The homeless people made me nervous, but Beth learned their names.*

*The only neighbors who bothered her were the guys who ran the tattoo parlor across the street. They got into traffic-stopping fights, harassed women on the sidewalk, and intimidated men. They were the reason Beth didn’t walk on that side of the street. For two years she glared out our window at the row of men sitting in front of the shop and fantasized about shooting out their tires.*

*Then one day she called me at work to tell me she was getting a tattoo. She’d never wanted a tattoo before and had even taken pride in being one of the few people in our group of friends with no body art. Though surprised, I said OK. Later she called me back and announced, “I did it.”*

*When I got home, Beth excitedly showed me the delicately inscribed words “Love thy neighbor” on her wrist. She explained how she’d marched across the street and gone into the tattoo parlor. The walls were covered with drawings of skulls, bloody knives, naked women, and the Virgin of Guadalupe.*

*Manuel, the proprietor, was working on somebody's backside. Beth introduced herself as his neighbor and asked if she could watch. He said, Sure.*

*After a while, she went outside and sat in front to study the world from their perspective. The guy next to her asked what she was getting done.*

*"'Love thy neighbor,' " she muttered. "Why?" he asked.*

*"Well, you guys are my neighbors, and I'm having trouble loving you. You kind of scare me — you know, with the fights that break out over here and all."*

*He ushered her back into the shop and announced, with complete sincerity, "Manuel, dude, we're scaring our neighbors! We got to stop fighting." Manuel was defensive — until Beth explained that she didn't want to change him; she just wanted to get this tattoo. Manuel showed her a picture in a magazine of "Love thy neighbor" tattooed on a man's inner forearm — with bloody knives in the background.*

*"Not exactly," said Beth. After they'd settled on a design, Manuel began to do his art on her wrist. Then he stopped. "How do you spell thy?" he asked shyly. "I didn't go to school." The other tattoo artist piped in, "Dude, it's not because you didn't go to school. It's because you don't read the Bible!"*

*From then on Beth would wave to the tattoo artists as if they were old pals. The music from across the street was not so grating to her nerves. No more fights broke out. The sidewalk felt safe.*

*Four months later, Beth took our car in for an oil change and saw Manuel talking to the repairman behind the counter. As she began to remind him who she was, he stepped forward and gave her a warm hug. "Hey," he said to his friend behind the counter, "this is my neighbor, the one I was telling you about."*

As Jesus said, ". . . 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."

Amen