

(Luke 18:9-14 NRSV)

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. ¹¹ 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. ¹² I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.' ¹³ 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!' ¹⁴ 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."

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Pride Goeth Before the Fall

A sermon preached at North-Prospect United Church of Christ, Cambridge,
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Text: Luke 18:9-14.

As I headed off to Divinity School, now many years ago, I asked my minister, What do you learn there, in Divinity School? She said, You learn how to read the Bible in its original language, you learn the historical context, you learn how to analyze the text with a fine toothed comb, to take it apart, to inspect each of its pieces with your mind s eye, roll it around piece by piece, and then to put it back together again, enriched by all this examination. She went on to say, When you get done, taking it apart and pitting it back together again, you find out that it says pretty much what you thought it did all along, but you feel like you re on much more solid ground to say so, and maybe its meaning seems deeper to you.

This morning s passage reminded me of that long ago conversation. The Pharisees are among the most complicated groups in Biblical times to get a handle on. The historical sources are few. And like the Bible, most of the sources have an agenda. Luke is writing perhaps fifty or sixty years after the events he narrates, during which time, great shifts in historical circumstance have taken place. And Luke s primary concern is to make Jesus comprehensible in Luke s present, to his community of Christians, not to give an accurate historical representation of the Pharisees in Jesus time. We don t know much about what the Pharisees were like, then, not much at all.

But when we ve concluded all this study and more, we discover that the meaning we are looking for isn t found in the historical relationship between Jesus and the Pharisees. It is found in the story which Luke tells. That is, for our purposes it is enough to know what Luke tells us, that the Pharisees represent to him Jesus opponents, opponents who, while perhaps well intentioned, miss important religious truths. And then we can see that this passage means just what we may have thought right from the beginning. It means that self-righteousness, even well-intentioned self-righteousness, that patting yourself on the back, usually goes hand in hand with contempt for others, and that Jesus doesn t like either one, either self-righteousness or contempt for others.

The prayer the Pharisee offers is a monologue. It starts with a hollow thanksgiving: Thank you, God, that I am not like other people. Then he looks

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around, spying out specimens to make his point: Like that guy standing over there. O God, thank you that I am not a rogue, a thief, and adulterer, that I am not like him.

When prayer turns to monologue, it really means that you are talking to yourself, which in the end is a rather uninformative closed loop. When prayer turns preachy, it means you are taking this uninformative conversation you have had with yourself and preaching it to, or at, God. As you may imagine, God is neither impressed nor humored by this.

But before we get too hard on the Pharisee, let's look at who he is, or at least who Luke has presented him to be. He is a person who has worked hard to do the right thing. He has carefully understood what God would require of him, and he has done his best to meet the requirements. He isn't a thief or an adulterer. He fasts when he is supposed to, and he gives a full tithe, a full 10% of his income away as contribution. In many ways, the Pharisee is a model person. And he does what he does because he believes in it. He believes it is right, and he believes that those who don't follow the right are quite simply wrong.

Is this so different from today? Look at the language and actions we bring to moral arguments in our time. Pro-life advocates call pro-choice advocates murderers for killing fetuses, and, ironically, some of the pro-life advocates feel so strongly about it they are willing to commit murder themselves. But pro-choice advocates also use strong rhetoric against their opponents, often calling them fools and narrow-minded. And both often have enough disgust for each other to echo the Pharisee's prayer, Thank God I am not like them. And both sides are dead certain that they are following the will of God, and that belief that they are following God's will is used to justify their language and their behavior, however outrageous it may be.

The Christian right certainly is a case in point. But so is the Christian left. The UCC and other mainline churches have often used a more benign sounding approach. For example, they have often talked about the need to educate people about one issue or another. We need to educate people about justice, about racism, or about peace. And if you scratched the surface only a little, you found out that what they meant was, We know what is right, thank God, and we need to set those who don't straight. It sounds a lot like our Pharisee, doesn't it?

One scholar has said that the liberal church would probably do well to understand the parable this way: The Pharisee is a prominent, well respected peace activist, while the tax collector is a relatively unknown line worker in the defense industry. While the example is a bit outdated, it sure pinches a bit more when you see it like that. The parable asks us to look at ourselves in the mirror and see the places where, in the service of our strongest and best convictions, we may have been or may be self-righteous and denigrating of others. I don't suppose any of us much

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likes the exercise, this looking into the mirror to recognize the dark side of our best convictions, but it is what the parable asks us to do. To look in the mirror and see if we can see ourselves as the Pharisee in this story.

So one problem is the way our convictions may lead us to treat others. It might even be tempting to say that the real problem is the treatment of others, and that is at least partially right. Tich Nat Han is a Vietnamese Buddhist monk who taught and practiced non-violent objection to that war that shattered his homeland. He has remained a peace activist of renown, but he is not always appreciated by other activists. For example, he was asked to address a peace rally in California during the Gulf War. He did, and he went further than some of his audience liked. For he said, This work you are doing against war and for peace is very important work, some of the most important work in the world. But I tell you, he went on to say, that you do not do the work of peace fully unless you can both oppose the war and at the same time write George Bush a love letter. Few of the anti-war protesters were willing to go that far, for to them, George Bush was the demon. Their mantra was, Thank you, O God, that I am not like him! They weren't about to write him a love letter.

So, Tich Nat Han was saying that it was very important how you treat others, even those with whom you disagree. But he was saying more than that, too. For when you love another, especially one with whom you disagree even on very important things, you see this other person as a real person, and you necessarily are more open to what this other person says and stands for. The easiest way to maintain the absolute certainty about what you believe is to demonize and hold your opponents at arms length O God, I am glad I am not like them! Then, like the Pharisee, you talk only to yourself. The only voice you hear is your own.

Sometimes Zen Buddhists talk about beginner's mind. What they mean is that you should never be too certain about things. You should always be a beginner, with a mind open for learning, never assuming that you have it all figured out. While I don't think Jesus ever used the term beginner's mind, that's one of the things he's trying to get across in this parable. The Pharisee, praying the way he does, makes it quite clear he thinks he has nothing to learn from the tax collector. Too bad, because he obviously does. Among the things he has to learn is a little humility. Look at how the tax collector prays. The tax collector recognizes his shortcomings and brings them to God seeking mercy.

But perhaps even more important than the Pharisee's unwillingness to learn anything from the tax collector, the Pharisee also finds he has nothing to learn from God. He speaks with a hollow thanksgiving for his goodness, which seems but a thinly veiled excuse to remind God how good he is, Hey, God, I tithe, I fast, I'm honest. The Pharisee reminds God just in case God wasn't noticing, or just in case God needed some help seeing him clearly. What a tragedy. Prayer is meant as a

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conversation with God, but there is no conversation unless you approach God with beginner's mind, unless you approach God with the idea that God may very well tell you something you don't already know.

And, of course, here is the rub. Most of us don't want to have our mind changed, our convictions tested, our lives transformed, even by God. Acknowledging that our certainty isn't as certain as we would like it to be, acknowledging that we are in many ways always beginners, acknowledging that the ground on which we stand is moving and shifting, usually makes us uncomfortable. Out of a fear of being wrong, we may strive to be certain and right. Certainty and conviction give us stability.

Paul talks about getting milk before you get to the solid food. Well, here Jesus is giving us some real solid food, he is telling us to grow up beyond our need for certainty and self-righteousness. Like Tich Nat Han, Jesus is asking us to hold our convictions gently and generously. To be sure, he asks us to advocate for what we believe to be right, but he also asks us to do it without contempt for others and with a mind open to hear God, or even our opponents.

If we do not, like the Pharisee, we will be humbled for the pride with which we have exalted ourselves. The stability we have achieved will leave us as solid as the pillar of salt Lot's wife became and as stiff in the neck as the Israelites in the desert were. But if we hold no contempt, even in the service of our deepest beliefs, and if we are open to others and to God, then we will live well, for we will have lived with kindness and compassion, and we will have learned from our conversations with others, and especially from our conversations with God.

Thanks be to God. Amen.