

The Marketplace

Ps. 84:1-7; Luke 18: 9-14

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My mother was a much more fastidious dresser than I am. As a teenager, ready to run out of the house in my bell-bottom jeans and tie-dyed shirts, she would stop me at the door and say, "Life is always taking your picture, you know." Like many people of our generation, I got the idea that there was this "at home" private person who was invisible to the world, and a "public" person who was always under scrutiny.

The line between private and public persona is blurring a lot more these days, because increasingly there's no such thing as an "at home" private person anymore. Most of us allow ourselves to be on video chat, or in online photos, or on Facebook in a way that gives us a much more permanently public face than we actually know or could ever have imagined just a few years ago. The public and the private selves lose their distinction.

In Jesus' time the public persona would have been much more limited. You were either at home and out of the public eye, or you were out and about in the marketplace, or in the slightly less public courtyard of the holy temple. Jesus' parable today is about two men in the temple, as we heard in the kids' story. But using our imagination, just minutes before our story begins, in order to get to the temple, the two men had to walk through the very public marketplace.

If any of you have been to a marketplace in a place like Mexico, or Haiti, or Africa, you know what it would have been like. Busy, crowded, people calling out asking you to buy their products, bumping into each other, haggling over prices. Now put these two men, the tax collector and the Pharisee, into the middle of the marketplace. How does their world see them?

Who is the Pharisee in the public eye? Although often portrayed as religious fanatics, close-minded opponents of Jesus in the gospel, that was not really their public persona to their contemporaries. They were religious purists, very strict in their habits of eating and dressing and acting, and very eager to stay uncontaminated by the rest of the world. They studied, a lot. Although they were not beggars, they were not wealthy in the ways of this world. We might consider them in the same sort of way we see Hasidic Jews or Amish folk in our own world; people who are different than we are, in dress and in behavior, and maybe a little stand-offish, but probably good people. He would've walked through the marketplace probably undisturbed.

And who is the tax-collector, automatically in the "unclean" category of people because he works for the Romans, the enemy, foreigners skimming off the riches of the land for their own benefit. The Roman governors employed some of the local people to help collect that wealth; and the tax collectors were despised by their fellow countryfolk. The Romans had to offer a good salary for this dirty work. So it's likely that the tax-collector looked wealthy: well-dressed, fancy accessories, and a man of the world.

He was the kind of customer vendors in the marketplace were trying to attract, and they were probably all calling out to him, trying to win his attention and his money, before he entered the temple gates.

But the public faces and places of the two men are somewhat reversed when they get into the temple. The Pharisee, although maybe dressed in a little older, shabbier robe, has all his shawl and fringes in place as he approaches close to the altar. In prayer, he reminds God of all the religious laws he has followed so fastidiously. He feels entitled to that pew in the temple, and to the place he holds in the religious community. He does not feel dependent upon God, because he feels he has already earned God's favor. He is proud.

The Tax Collector, in contrast, might be dressed very well. (Many of the paintings and sketches of this story show him in rags, but I think that's unlikely.) In the temple he knows his place at the outer edge. He knows that he has broken God's laws significantly, by cheating people out of their resources if not anything worse. He cannot even stand up straight and proud in God's house. Instead he averts his head and bows his body low. Here, in front of God and in front of one another, the two prayers of confession are in direct contrast. The Tax Collector knows that he has sinned, missed the mark, and knows he is completely dependent on God's grace and forgiveness. He has no control over it. He is humble.

So maybe that's the lesson we are to draw? That you can be proud in the marketplace, if you want to be, but when you are face to face with God in prayer, you can't. Be humble. Be honest about what you are. Tell the truth.

End of sermon right here? Not quite: you should be suspicious of me when I say that so early in a sermon. This is not really the end, but the beginning. Tell the truth about yourself – and about your community – in prayer. A very fundamental principle in Christianity. But what IS that truth?

Today's truth is a classic, brought to you by the Protestant Reformation. Next week is Reformation Sunday already, the celebration of Luther's posting his criticisms on the door of Wittenburg Cathedral and starting the huge earthquake that split the Western Church in two. If you never studied this history in Sunday School, Luther had two big points for you to memorize. The first was that scripture – the Bible – is the ultimate source of authority in the church. *Sola Scriptura*, in Latin. And the second principle you have surely heard: we are saved by grace alone. Luther was fed up with the church raising money by selling "indulgences": a fee that would guarantee your dead friend or family member would get into heaven. "No!" shouted Luther. "We are not saved by payment or by good deeds or by any other thing that is under our control, We are saved by grace alone, We can neither buy it with good deeds nor demand it. We don't control it. is the greatest gift, free, from a God who loves us beyond all measure.

So back to the parable for a moment: do you remember how there is some sort of surprise in a parable? One surprise here is at the end: that we find out it is the humble and not the proud who are justified. But there's a bigger shock for those listening in Jesus' audience: the surprise is the role reversal. The guy who is trying so very hard to follow God's law, to pray regularly, tithe, fast, dress correctly: this is the one who ultimately does not find God's favor.

And the one who is causing so much pain and suffering for other people, the well-dressed sinner, a traitor who works for the hated Romans: it is THIS guy who goes home justified, says Jesus. That's a surprise.

The tax collector's speech makes our understanding short and simple.

"God have mercy on me, a sinner."

Kyrie eleison, we often sing. Christ have mercy, Lord have mercy.

I am helpless to help myself. It's also the first of the Twelve Steps, for those of you familiar with them. I know that I am not in control of my life, that there is a higher power. Period. No argument.

And so my life – and my death- are in your hands, O God. I have to turn it over to you entirely, to help sort me out.

The Pharisee, whatever else we may think of him, believes he is in charge, by doing these good things and following the ten commandments. That is THE paramount danger for all of us: that we think we have the power to set things straight. If only we can find the right knowledge, the right words, the right diet, the right medicines, or even the right presidential candidate, we'll be in control of it. If we can just do it right, then we will have the power and everything will turn out fine. Not.

Today we come face to face, like it our not, with our Calvinist heritage. We modern progressives usually get very squirmy and uncomfortable at this point. We don't like saying: we are miserable sinners who have lost our way and cannot free ourselves. We don't believe in original sin.

We don't feel as if we are lost, most of the time. We resist saying that we are totally dependent on the grace and mercy of God, that God's salvation has nothing to do with our deserving, being good, or our good works. It's tough for us to accept the fact that God loves us just as we are.

Of course there will always be those who are misled by this statement, "saved by grace alone." They tell of the crusty old Lutheran farmer on his deathbed who was asked if he was afraid to die. "No," he replied indignantly, "I know I will go to heaven because I haven't done a single good deed in my lifetime, and therefore I know I am not guilty of works righteousness. I am saved by grace alone."

So far we have learned we are to be humble. And that we are saved by grace. But is this all about individuals – what, if anything, does it mean for God's community?

Let's look at that parable one more time. Not only is the Pharisee's self-righteous, but he also has contempt for the tax collector, passing judgment himself. "Thank God I'm not like him.: Like this OTHER person. In that moment, walls are born and prejudice established. Not like him.

There is a sermon by one of the 6th century desert monastic fathers, Dorotheos of Gaza. His community was struggling with a plague of self-righteousness and in-fighting. In this sermon he did not begin with a scolding, but rather suggested that the Pharisee was right when he thanked God for giving him the ability to do good things. We should all thank God when we find we can live according to our faith and values.

BUT being grateful is not the same thing as bragging. The thing which the Pharisee did really wrong, according to Dorotheos, was that he passed judgment on the tax collector, and dismissed him as being completely worthless and therefore, of less value to God. “There is only the sin of being scornful,” said the desert Father.

A contemporary preacher, Paul Duke, comes to a similar conclusion. “The Pharisee’s prayer is not much different from other traditional Jewish prayers, except for the little word “like” ” he says. “The Pharisee does not give thanks for the fact that God has spared him from being a thief, a rogue, or a tax collector: he thanks God that he is not LIKE the OTHER. He goes from gratitude to elitism in a single word.

We break relationship and compassion when we create the wall of us-them, the language of “other”. Wouldn’t it be wonderful if we could thank God for the good things we have been able to do, for our positive visions, for the hope we carry, and then just stop without having to prove we are better than someone else?

There are some days, in our busy and often anxious lives, when we are keenly aware that we live and breathe only by God’s grace. There are those days in which everything seems to be spiraling out of control and out of our reach. There are those days of fear about the future of our nation. There are those days in which we create another wall in between all our very human brothers and sisters.

And it is then that we must reach into ourselves for the so-called Sinners' Prayer: God have mercy on me, a sinner. I am no better and also no worse than other human beings whom God loves

In closing, listen again to the timeless words of Shakespeare re: mercy:

“The quality of mercy is not strained.

It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven

Upon the place beneath. It is twice blessed:

It blesseth him that gives and him that takes.

'Tis mightiest in the mightiest. It becomes

The thronèd monarch better than his crown.

His scepter shows the force of temporal power,

The attribute to awe and majesty

Wherein doth sit the dread and fear of kings,

But mercy is above this sceptered sway.

It is enthronèd in the hearts of kings.

It is an attribute to God himself.

And earthly power doth then show likest God's

When mercy seasons justice. Therefore, Though justice be thy plea,
consider this-

That in the course of justice none of us

Should see salvation. We do pray for mercy,

And that same prayer doth teach us all to render

The deeds of mercy..

1How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord of hosts!

2My soul longs, indeed it faints for the courts of the Lord; my heart and my flesh sing for joy to the living God.

3Even the sparrow finds a home, and the swallow a nest for herself, where she may lay her young, at your altars, O Lord of hosts, my King and my God.

4Happy are those who live in your house, ever singing your praise. Selah

5Happy are those whose strength is in you, in whose heart are the highways to Zion.

6As they go through the valley of Baca they make it a place of springs; the early rain also covers it with pools.

7They go from strength to strength; the God of gods will be seen in Zion.

9He 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."