

The Problem with Piety

Luke 18:9-14

February 5, 2023

In the fall of 2000, when I began my freshman year of college, the plan was crystal clear. A Duke diploma, a political science major, a law degree, a future in elected office for public service. That plan lasted one semester. That fall, with great expectation, I registered for a class titled, "Political Systems in Contemporary America," and the turning point for me that semester was a lecture on the impact of negative campaigning. We complain about this strategy from all points of the political spectrum, how it demoralizes us, how it erodes our trust in public institutions. Still, attack ads get results. I remember how our professor calmly explained that the reason for the prevalence of such campaigning is its consistent record of effectiveness. "It turns out," he said, "that in politics you really can lift yourself up by tearing others down. The research proves it."

Lifting yourself up by tearing others down. This playground bully principle is repeated in almost every arena of our common life. Jesus knew this. And so, in the eighteenth chapter of Luke's gospel, he offers a parable that is as relatable as any story he ever told, as relevant as the latest political attack ad, hateful Facebook post, or tweetstorm. A story about two approaches to prayer. A story that seems straightforward enough. But be careful—the world is upside down.

First, the Pharisee. His prayer is more resumé recitation, describing to God (and anyone else within earshot) his enviable qualifications for righteousness. But, before getting to his list of religious accolades, the man makes clear what he is not—specifically *who* he is not. He is *not* like other people: sinners, thieves, adulterers, or even that guy over in the corner—I think he's a tax collector. In this prayer, the Pharisee lifts himself up by tearing others down. A blatant attack ad using the easiest of targets imaginable.

*Thank God I am not like **those** people.*

Then there is the tax collector. He stands far away. He looks down. He begs for God's mercy. His prayer is not public spectacle; it is private plea. He prays for forgiveness. He confesses to God *his* weakness. He has no time for opposition research on the Pharisee. He lifts himself up, not through insulting others, but through his desperate prayer. *Lord, have mercy on **me**.*

And, according to Jesus, the tax collector returns home reconciled, justified before God. And in case we missed it, he makes the moral of the story explicit: if you praise yourself, you will be humbled; if you humble yourself, you will be lifted up.

It is, of course, a frequent theme in the teachings of Jesus. Here's a sampling:

The last shall be first, and the first shall be last—more on *that* next week.

Any who want to be my disciples must deny themselves, take up their cross, and follow me.

Whoever wants to be first must be servant of all.

Those who wish to save their lives must lose them.

All who exalt themselves will be humbled.

A frequent theme and a mystifying promise for all who belong to a culture that rewards self-promotion and celebrates success achieved at any cost. The kind of truthful humility the tax collector offers has no place in our time. Like the Pharisee, we have become well-practiced at pointing fingers at the sins of others, smug in our own righteousness by comparison. So focused are we on our own

righteousness, we have lost sight of the *common* good, the good we share, instead satisfied with merely what is better for our side. And the consequences of this behavior surround us in every direction, in demonizing rhetoric and violent—even deadly—action. The virtue of self-reflective humility placed central to the parable has mostly disappeared from our public life, and worse, it has been replaced by the very contempt that Jesus warns us against. And we are all worse off for that.

In August, the Pew Research Center published a set of survey data under the following headline: *Intensely Negative Feelings about the Opposing Party Grow*. Now, that statement is not likely to shock you, but the rate of growth might raise eyebrows. In 2022, 62% of Republicans and 54% of Democrats say they hold “very unfavorable” views of the other party. When I walked into that lecture hall in the fall of 2000, those numbers were 20% and 26%. They have tripled in two decades.

Something significant is happening. Something alarming is taking place in our nation. Most of us do not need the data to prove this reality. We experience it in our own lives, in our workplaces, in our schools, in our neighborhoods, and yes, even in our own families. How differences of opinion take on an existential tone, debate devolved into a ping-pong of personal attacks. Relationships, cultivated over decades, are ended over disagreements. You sure can hear it in the language used to describe political adversaries. Words like enemy, demonic, a threat to our way of life, un-American, evil.

It seems the words of the Pharisee are timeless, and his intent as current as breaking news—to make himself bigger by tearing down those who are vulnerable, who are different. Easy targets. *I thank God that I am not like those people.*

This kind of “othering” is particularly ubiquitous when we spend so much of our lives in echo chambers that reinforce our assumptions and weaponize our preconceptions. Would you like an illustration of how tricky this temptation can be? Consider how this morning’s parable functions. It

texts us. It sets a trap. We who hear it quickly label the characters. And then we draw lines. *I thank you, God, that I am not like that self-righteous Pharisee!* Except. Wait. What have I done? The focus of the parable is not the behavior of either man but the absurd, offensive mercy of God. Its message to us is this: *Whenever you draw a line between who is in and who is out, you will find God on the other side of that line.* It could be the most difficult lesson we ever learn, even more difficult to put into practice.

God’s mercy exceeds the reach of our minds. Do you believe that? Do you believe that the mercy of God exceeds the reach of your mind? If so, how will you live? If we as a church believe those words are true, how will we express that belief? As a community of faith, we *must* stand together in opposition to the kind of self-righteous “othering” that the parable condemns. Against a culture of contempt, we must build intentional places for genuine dialogue and authentic community. We must build a house where all are welcome. We cannot allow voices of disdain and derision to fill the vacuum of our silence. For God’s sake, for the sake of the children we baptize and the neighbors we serve, we must speak out and be counted. And, as we do, we must remember always the witness of the tax collector. “God have mercy on *me*, a sinner.”

My sermon title may have surprised you. After all, why would a preacher have a problem with piety? Shouldn’t we celebrate and honor devout reverence and godliness? Of course we should. The problem with piety is that, in human hands, it so quickly turns to golden calf. You see, the Pharisee *is* righteous. He *is* righteous. He is condemned not for being pious but for worshiping his piety as an idol at the expense of his neighbor. The tax collector is praised for the authenticity of his prayer. His words open him to receive God’s unconditional mercy.

Friends, our moment in time begs for places of humble engagement intent on finding common ground. Our moment in time begs for a community that will avoid harmful or dismissive othering. And here’s the good news. At Second Church, this work is our identity. It is core to our mission. It is essential to our future.

At its very best, the church of Jesus Christ exists as a counterculture. In here, we are rooted in a different story, a deeper truth: God's mercy extends to all, especially anyone you are likely to dismiss or demonize. In here, we believe you can build up without tearing down. We believe that we can be, in the powerful words of Isaiah, *repairers of the breach*. We can be people of grace.

Grace. That's what the tax collector receives. That's what changes his life, reconciles him to God. Now to be clear, grace is available to the Pharisee as well, but he sees no need for it. He has his righteousness.

Grace. Freely and abundantly offered.

Grace. Ours to share in this broken and beloved community.

Grace. A gift that might just change the world.

Grace. Let it begin with us.