

“Cultivating the Humility of the Tax Collector” Grace Episcopal Church
The Rev. Gary Coffey Gospel Reading: Luke 18:9-14 10/27/13

The Gospel reading for today includes a great parable from Jesus that we probably get immediately, especially here in the South. For if we native southerners were taught anything growing up it was that bragging and arrogance are bad. This has been ingrained so deeply in us that sometimes we have trouble promoting ourselves in interviews or on resumes because we were taught that humility, being humble is the way we are supposed to live.

So, when we hear the pompous Pharisee congratulating himself for how good he is, we are immediately turned off. And by contrast, when we hear the sinner, the tax collector beating his breast, admitting his shortcomings, coming to God in great humility, we applaud him are not surprised when Jesus says that it was He who went away justified or right with God, because He humbled Himself and asked for God’s help and for forgiveness.

The Contemplative tradition in the Christian faith teaches that each of us has a true self and a false self. The true self, who we truly are, is the self made in the image and likeness of God and reflected most fully in the life of our Lord Jesus who only had a true self and no false self. Then, there is the false self, that part of us that is brought to the fore when we yield to temptation. The false self can be everything that the true self is not, can’t it? It can be the antithesis of our Lord Jesus in its selfishness and arrogance.

Our goal, of course, is to do things to cultivate our true self so that it becomes so strong within us that it pushes out or displaces the false self.

All of this said, when we hear this story of the tax collector and the Pharisee, in our heart of hearts, we know that we have both of these persons dwelling within us, the Pharisee representing the false self, and the repentant tax collector representing our true self. The big question for us as people of faith is, “How do we go about encouraging and cultivating our true self so much so that our false self starves, atrophies and dies?”

There are a variety of ways that our faith teaches us that we can do this and it is probably fair to say that some of the practices will appeal and work best for some and others for others because God wired us up differently in terms of personality and temperament. That being the case, each of us will need to experiment with the practices of the Christian faith and find the ones that work best for you and for me.

As we begin to think about these various practices through which we can cultivate humility and allow the false self to die, it is helpful to remember that we are disciples of Jesus Christ. That is, we are His followers or students. The word disciple and discipline come from the same root words. A disciple is a student or follower that follows a discipline or rule of life. Now a discipline is something that we do because we know that it is beneficial. We know that disciplines, by definition, are not always pleasant.

For example, if you are learning to play a musical instrument of some kind, you must develop and discipline of regular practice. Will practicing regularly be enjoyable or fun? Sometimes it may be, but that is not the point. The discipline of regular practice is about moving toward the goal in being proficient at playing the musical instrument. Therefore, the discipline of regular practice must be embraced and followed through on whether it is pleasant or not because, remember, the goal, the end result is the ability to play beautiful music with ease and skill.

As disciples of Jesus, we pretty much have to take the same approach. We have to decide that we wish to be like Jesus. To be like Jesus, to operate primarily in our true self, means to bear the fruit of the Holy Spirit, things like love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness and self control. This is God's will for us. Like playing a musical instrument with ease and skill, having a life which exhibits love, joy, peace, patience and self control, is probably attractive to us. These fruit of the Holy Spirit are a pretty good description of a happy and fulfilling life, wouldn't you agree? It is something that we desire. However, in order to get there, it requires discipline, and the discipline may not always be pleasant. No pain, no gain, right?

Let's think for a few minutes about some of the disciplines of the faith that are helpful to us in cultivating or encouraging our true selves. One important one is worship. Worship comes from an Old English word, worthship, which means ascribing worth or value to something. Our worship of God is about ascribing ultimate worth and value to our relationship with God. It is about the understanding that to humble ourselves before God means that we need God in our lives like we need the air we breathe. Humility is about acknowledging that God is God

and that we are not God. In the Episcopal Church, the songs and the words of Scripture and the liturgy assist us in ascribing honor and glory and power to this God that we love because God first loved us. Worship helps us be thankful for all of the gifts that God has given us and to learn to trust God with our very lives, and the lives of those whom we love. That's why worship is not just about coming to church each week. Coming to church each week is about honoring God with our presence. The word liturgy which is the script we follow in our worship through the prayer book comes from two Greek words *laos* and *ergo*, *laos*, people and *ergo* work. The liturgy therefore is the work of the people of God in ascribing glory and honor and praise and thanksgiving to God. God does not need our worship, but we as God's children need to worship God.

Another important discipline for us as Christians is prayer. Prayer simply defined is communication with God which helps build and enhance our relationship with God. Prayer is one of those practices that must be tailored to the one who is praying. There are many ways to pray. I try to encourage folks to talk with God like you would talk to a friend. Tell God what is on your mind and heart. Like a good friend, share not only your joys but also your frustrations and sorrows and disappointments. And like a true friend, don't be afraid to tell God if you are disappointed or angry with God. God loves you. God knows your heart anyway, but it does us good to come out with it. Another way of praying is to use the beautiful prayers from the prayer book and other sources. The value of this way of praying is that gifted writers sometimes can help us bring to mind things that we would like to say to God, but may not know how or may not be aware that we have those

feelings. So, there is nothing wrong, and everything right with praying prayers that others have written. Thirdly, there is the prayer of silence or contemplative or centering prayer. On this third or fourth try in my life, I am finally learning how to be with God in the silence. There is great value in this kind of prayer as it is making oneself available to God for God to make adjustments within us, for lack of a better way of putting it. Currently, we have one centering prayer group here at Grace that meets at 530 on Wednesdays for an hour in my office. I would love to have ten groups here at Grace. So, if you are interested, please let me know.

A third path to humility is service. Jesus said that he did not come to be served but to serve and to lay down his life as a ransom for many. In following Jesus into the loving service of others, with Him, we learn to put Christ and others first, and ourselves second which may be the definition of humility.

St. Paul's words to the Philippians from chapter two describes it well. Beginning at chapter 2, verse 1 we read,

If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,
who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.

And being found in human form,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross.

Therefore God also highly exalted him
and gave him the name
that is above every name,
so that at the name of Jesus
every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue should confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.

Humility, then, Beloved, is about emptying ourselves as Christ emptied himself, and taking the form of servants, with the help of the Holy Spirit or Spirit of Jesus, striving to be obedient servants of God in all that we do, serving those around us, in whatever way we can. In following the Servant Christ, we can and will walk in humility knowing that it is not about us at all, but about this wonderful Christ that we are endeavoring to follow.

Regarding these Scripture cards that we have been handing out every Sunday, this week we are finishing up the month of October where we concentrated on the teaching of Jesus about loving God and in November the meditation/memory cards will be about loving others. But remember, we started in the month of September learning verses about humility, about humbling ourselves before God. And I'm sure that Gary Smalley or his son or whoever came up with these four teachings of Jesus made the first one humility because it has to come

first. For it is only in humbling ourselves before God as the tax collector did, that our hearts will be opened and be able to move on to loving God and loving others.

We thought together this morning about three disciplines or paths for us to walk toward humility: the path of worship; the path of prayer; and the path of serving others as Jesus served.

Remember the teaching in today's Gospel from our Lord Jesus as He said, "For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."

Or as Eugene Petersen translated those words in *The Message*,

"If you walk around with your nose in the air, you're going to end up flat on your face, but if you're content to be simply yourself, you will become more than yourself."

Or we might amend Petersen's translation by saying, "But if you're content to be simply yourself, you will become your true self."

AMEN.