
The Pharisee is a Sitting Duck

A sermon by Dean Sam Candler

Proper 25 – Year C

The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed, “God, I thank you that I am not like other people. ...the tax collector, standing far off ... prayed, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner.” –Luke 18:9-14

Okay, I get this one! Finally, after hearing some confusing parables here at church in the past few week—finally!—I get one I can understand.

Most of us have probably heard this story of the Pharisee and the tax collector. Two men go into the temple to pray. One man is a steady religious-type, from a prestigious and well-off family; he reminds God that he is doing all the right things, and he thanks God that he is not like other people. The other man in the temple works in the tax collection office, for the government, never a popular job with your neighbors; he simply prays for God to have mercy on him.

This is one of those easy-to-understand parables. “The one who exalts himself will be humbled, and the one who humbles herself will be exalted.”

Yep. I get this part of the Bible very clearly. I get it. And so, I want to give thanks today, too. I want my prayer to be, “Thank you, God. Thank you so much. O God, I thank you that I am not like that Pharisee...”

Oops.

How easy it would be to say that! Oh, I thank God that I am not like that Pharisee. Of course, as soon as we say that, we have missed the entire point of the parable! One of the most easily interpreted parables in the New Testament may be this one, the one that sets us up for a fall.

I wonder if, in this little parable, Jesus is setting us up. Jesus sets the Pharisee up to be a sitting duck, an obvious and easy target for our criticism. Then, when we compare ourselves to the arrogance of the Pharisee, it is we who feel comfortable and justified. And, as soon as do that, it is we who begin to exalt ourselves. It is we who become the easy target. We are the ones who are sitting ducks.

Even if you have never been duck hunting, I hope you know what a sitting duck is. She is the one swimming alone in the middle of the pond, preening and quacking and honking. His arrogance and complacency are so evident, that one hardly needs to point him out.

The sitting duck is a very easy target. The Pharisee is a very easy target! But get this: it is hard to preach against the Pharisee without sounding like a Pharisee oneself. Let me say that again. It is hard to preach against the Pharisee without sounding like a Pharisee!

I wonder if Jesus knew how human nature would interpret this parable in ages to come—that, inevitably, various tribes and communities—and the church!—would thank God that we are not like other people. We are not like this group, or that group, or this political faction, or that interest group.

Listen to the Pharisee shout so loudly about what he is *against*. “I am not a thief,” he claims, “or a rogue, or an adulterer.” But, consider what happens when any one of us begins to make a list of what we are not. When we begin to make such a list, the list takes on an energy of its own. The list refuses to stop. The Pharisee begins to catalog all those people whom he is *not* like, until finally, he claims that he is not like this tax collector.

Yet, this tax collector is the one who is praying with him in the temple! The Pharisee, quacking so cheerfully about who he is not like, finally admits that he is separated even from his fellow worshipper. The Pharisee is all alone.

The ultimate sin of the Pharisee is that he separates himself. He separates himself from humanity one category at a time. He finally separates himself even from the poor soul who is worshipping with him that day. And the more the Pharisee separates himself from humanity, the more he separates himself from God. He is completely out of relationship.

The sitting duck Church defines itself by what it is not. And when any community of faith does that, the pond shrinks. The community becomes smaller and smaller.

Okay, the Pharisee is a sitting duck. But there is something worse than a sitting duck. Where I come from, the one thing worse than a sitting duck is someone who shoots at a sitting duck. You don’t shoot a sitting duck. The sport is in the hunt, the wait, the bird on the wing—in the air, the proper calculation of barrel and trigger, the moment, the shoot. It is not civilized to shoot a sitting duck! And that is why it is hard to speak so vociferously against the Pharisee! As soon as I point out the sin of the Pharisee, I run the risk of becoming a sitting duck myself.

Jesus solves the problem by speaking so eloquently in parables. When he merely puts forward the two expressions of faith, it is rather easy to see who is justified. For Jesus, the justified person, the righteous person, is the one who is in right relationship. “Lord, have mercy.” That simple prayer emerges from the person who seems excluded, left out of relationship.

“Lord, have mercy.” Yes, this is the deep prayer of someone who feels a bit left out, the ordinary Christian, the one who is not being interviewed by every television station, whose comments are not being tweeted or posted on Facebook, someone who finds it hard to swim in this deep water. It is the humble prayer of someone who cannot fly in such gusty conditions. It is the prayer of the ordinary Christian, the left-out tax collector: “God, be merciful to me, a sinner.”

That prayer, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner,” does not have to be loud to be effective. It has been prayed softly, way out in the back of the church, for centuries now. It has been the silent prayer of our souls when we could not sleep in the middle of the night. It has been prayed in hospital rooms across this city and across the world.

But men and women have also wailed that prayer after the most horrifying of experiences. “Lord, have mercy!” In the middle of hurricanes and floods and wildfires, the simplest prayer of all time is also the most effective: “Lord, have mercy.”

Early in Christian history, the words soon became “Lord, have mercy, Christ have mercy, Lord have mercy.” They became the opening words of solemn Christian liturgy, and then, later, set to music in the great “Kyries” of the masses of Johann Sebastian Bach.

In old Russia, a lonely monk wanted to learn how to follow the instructions of First Thessalonians 5:17, “Pray without ceasing.” How can one pray without ceasing? That monk learned that he could pray while he breathed in and out, with a prayer that we now know as “the Jesus Prayer:”

*“Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God,
Have mercy on me, a sinner.”*

The monks of ancient Greece used that prayer, and contemplative saints today use that Jesus Prayer all over the world. If any one of us today is just learning to pray, remember that the way we pray actually does make a difference; the words really are important. Simply “giving thanks” is not effective at all if what we are giving thanks for is being not like other people!

Maybe the only words we really need are the simple ones, “God, have mercy upon me, a sinner.” When life seems to have left us out, “Lord, have mercy” acknowledges our need.

But it’s not mere exaltation that results from that prayer. The reward of humility is not exaltation, as if exaltation were the

opposite of humility. The reward of humility is relationship. Ultimately, this parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector is about relationship. Because that's what righteousness is; it is relationship, right relationship.

Remember the very opening lines of this passage? Jesus told this parable "to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt" (Luke 18:9). The reason the Pharisee was not righteous was because he was not in relationship, and he was astoundingly proud and thankful that he was not in relationship. "I thank you God," he said, "that I am not like other people."

Those are the words of someone out of relationship. Someone who is a sitting duck, out alone on the water, out of community.

We have all been there. Maybe some of us are there right now. "Lord, have mercy on us." And may our humility, with God's mercy, bring us into right relationship—with our neighbor, with the world, with God. That is exquisite exaltation.

AMEN.

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