
Orienteering 101

A sermon by the Rev. Canon David Boyd
The Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost: Proper 25, Year C

It was a hot, dusty day at summer camp when I first found a compass in my hands. It was Orienteering day. The task was simple enough. Get from point A to point B, crossing difficult and confusing terrain using only a rudimentary map and a compass.

The day began with Orienteering 101, an introductory course on navigating with a compass. The instructor taught us how to line up your heading on the map, how to set your degree on the compass, and that little rule of thumb: “put the dog in the doghouse.” Keep the magnetic needle in the red compass housing and you’ll head where you want to go. The instructor also warned us that accuracy matters. Every degree off course adds up over distance.

As I set off on the orienteering course, I became utterly fixated on the compass. Holding the compass to my chest, head down, I kept my eyes glued to that little red needle, trying to keep the dog perfectly aligned in the doghouse. My vision narrowed and narrowed... you can probably guess what happened next. I orienteered myself right into a ditch! That was not the only misstep that day... it turns out, orienteering requires much more than just watching a needle. There’s so much data to take in: elevation changes, landmarks, the very dirt beneath your feet. I had to learn how to balance checking the compass with keeping my eyes up to the horizon.

The Kingdom of God does not need more navel-gazers. Narrow vision focused solely on self does not build up God’s dream for the world. Pride, that great and deadly sin, narrows our vision until we can only see ourselves. The Kingdom of God has no need for ego-trippers; it needs people who lift up their eyes to God’s vast horizon.

This, I think, is what Jesus is getting at with this morning’s parable. He told his story to some folks who “trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt.” In other words, he spoke to people who thought about themselves first and last and every moment in between. Jesus paints them two portraits: two worshippers in the same temple, praying to the same God, but meditating on two very different things.

The Pharisee has his moral compass fixed to his chest. He is certain of his direction. He is fixated on the needle. “God, I thank you that I am not like other people,” he prays loudly, certainly endearing himself to his fellow worshippers. “Thank you, God, that I’m right. Thank you that I’m good. Thank you that I’m generous and just. Thank you, God, that I’m just like you!”

The Pharisee’s pride has so contorted him that he’s forgotten how to lift his eyes to God. His field of vision has collapsed to the point that the only thing he can see is himself. What a tragedy it is when we find ourselves more interesting than God! Pride shrinks the world down until we’re the main character and God becomes a background detail. Pride takes what properly belongs to God – justice, mercy, holiness – and projects those attributes onto ourselves.

Perhaps the Pharisee’s moral compass really is pointed in the right direction. Maybe he really does fast and tithe. Maybe he keeps his nose clean and does not behave like those thieves and rogues and adulterers. But he’s mistaken his good habits for the character of God. He’s convinced that *he* is just, *he* is pure, *he* is holy. In doing so, he’s made the creature out to be the Creator.

Then there’s the tax collector. He holds a different posture, the posture of a contrite heart. From his knees, he can see the whole landscape. He knows the order of things. He is the creature; God is the Creator. It is God who is holy. It is God who is both just and merciful. It is God whose character is unchanging, whose grace

makes the entire journey possible in the first place. For this tax collector, God is infinitely more interesting, infinitely more compelling, infinitely more wonderful than his sin or anything else about him.

Jesus tells us that this man, the tax collector, goes home justified rather than the other. The one who knew he was lost found his way home. The one who thought he had perfect direction wandered right into the ditch.

Such is the pitfall of pride: it tricks us into thinking that moral correctness is the same thing as holiness. But holiness has nothing to do with our performance but instead our proximity to God. Pride can make us look very religious and sound very devout, all the while keeping us at a distance from the God we claim to worship.

When we come into this chapel, when we kneel, when we pray, when we open our hearts before God, it's worth asking: Where is your vision oriented? Where is your focus placed? On yourself? On your neighbor in the pew? Or on God?

If our thoughts at church are mostly about how we're doing, about how our life stacks up, how our neighbor compares, how well we've kept the rules, then our spiritual compass is turned inward. We're navel-gazing, fixated on the needle. This morning, Jesus invites us to re-orient our spiritual compass toward God.

Worship is not meant to make us stare harder at ourselves. It's meant to lift up our eyes to God, to the horizon of grace, to the mercy that sustains us for the journey. The tax collector knows this. He's not performing his piety; he's praying. He holds the posture of contrition and clarity.

There's freedom to be found in that posture, when we stop pretending to be the main character and start trusting our God who actually is. That's when we assume the posture of humility. No, not humiliation, but humility. Humility opens our vision so we can see the world as it really is: God as God, ourselves as creature, and our neighbors as fellow travelers along the way.

The Kingdom of God doesn't need more navel-gazers. It needs people willing to look up and out, to lift their eyes from themselves and see the vast horizon of God's mercy stretching out before them. You can't make the journey with your head down. You'll miss the landmarks, the elevation changes. You'll lose the trail and stumble into the ditch.

So, when you next find yourself in prayer, here or anywhere, wonder, "Where is my vision focused?" If the answer is, "me," lift your eyes. Lift your eyes to God whose mercy is the true north, whose grace steadies our course, and whose love will, at the end of all our wandering, bring us safely home.

Amen.