



“Hubris”

Scripture – Luke 18:9-14

Sermon Preached by Gregory Knox Jones

Sunday, October 19, 2014

I have a personal policy regarding doctors: I do not go to one who knows everything. When we lived in Virginia, my internist was in a practice with two others. They had a thriving practice, so it was difficult to land an appointment with my favorite. Once, when I needed to see someone quickly, I took an appointment with a physician I had never seen. I explained my problem and began to share my ideas of what was causing it, when he cut me off. He said, “You stick to preaching and I’ll do the diagnosing!”

From there he attempted to impress me with his vast knowledge of medicine and to assure me he could pinpoint my problem. He was cocky and, not surprisingly, he failed to figure out my problem.

Later, when I was able to see my doctor, he said, “Well, I’m not sure. There are a few possibilities and I think we can narrow things down with a few tests.” My confidence soared because here was a doctor who knew he did not know everything and he was willing to do research. I can work with that. But when a doctor starts displaying the hubris of being all-knowing, I start edging for the door.

The arrogance is certainly not confined to the field of medicine. Whether it is a doctor or a minister, an attorney or a professor, give me someone who is bright and experienced, but not full of himself. Gandhi said, “It is unwise to be too sure of one’s own wisdom. It is healthy to be reminded that the strongest might weaken and the wisest might err.” Which brings us to this morning’s parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector.

Jesus loved to use shock therapy on unsuspecting audiences. He told stories that delivered a penetrating jolt and made people reassess their thinking.

In today’s parable, Jesus draws a contrast between two people who could not have been more different. On one hand, a tax collector. This was an individual who collected taxes from his neighbors and handed the money over to the Roman government; a fellow Jew who took a portion of his neighbors’ income and gave it to the occupying army and most likely skimmed a little extra to line his own pocket. The Romans recruited scoundrels whose love for money was greater than their love for neighbor. If there was anyone who did not deserve respect, anyone universally recognized as a traitor, it was a tax collector.

A Pharisee was someone on the opposite end of the virtue spectrum. Many of us think of Pharisee as a synonym for hypocrite, but in the time of Jesus, Pharisees were recognized as ultra devout individuals who strictly patterned their lives after the 613 laws in the Jewish Scriptures. Parents encouraged their children to pattern their lives after such principled people.

Jesus said, “Two men went up to the temple to pray. One a Pharisee and the other a tax collector.” It was no surprise to his audience to hear that a Pharisee was in the temple praying. Prayer was a significant part of their lives. But a crook going to the temple to pray? The audacity of the man!

The Pharisee gave thanks that he was not a thief, a rogue or an adulterer. He fasted and gave a generous portion of his income to God. (O Lord, give us a handful of these people!) The tax collector did not say a prayer of thanksgiving, but rather admitted the obvious. He was a sinner. And he begged God for mercy.

Then Jesus delivered the shock that made the crowd question what they had always been taught – the rascal went home justified while the one who scrupulously followed the commandments did not.

The gospel writer fails to mention the crowd’s reaction, but surely someone who heard this parable must have said, “Hold on just a minute, Jesus. The Pharisee is an honest man. You can’t trust the tax collector as far as you can throw him. This maggot finally feels guilty for swindling us and pleads for mercy. Will he live a Godly life now or is he simply going to plead, ‘Help me! Help me!’?”

We need to be careful with this text and not turn an admission of guilt into a virtue. All of us know people who have tried to justify their lying, greed or other bad behavior by saying, “Well, at least I’m not a hypocrite,” as if being a hypocrite is the ultimate sin that clears all wrongdoing.

Jesus is not encouraging people to skip all of those pesky commandments that crimp our style in favor of doing whatever we please and then pleading for mercy. In this parable, Jesus is not focusing on behavior. He is pushing us to go within our minds and to think about our underlying view of ourselves.

The Pharisee says, “God, I thank you that I am not like other people.” He is capital “I”, large font and bold print. He’s like the CEO who prided himself on being a devout person and would pray, “God, use me, especially in an advisory capacity.”¹

Author Tom Holland paints a portrait of Roman values in the first century. Winning was a supreme value. You could lie, cheat and connive, as long as you won. Arrogance, selfishness and conceit were considered positive Roman virtues.²

Jesus flipped such thinking on its head by declaring, “All who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.”

You may know someone like Gary. I knew him in college and he prided himself on being a faithful Christian. He was kind, trustworthy and caring. He went to weekly Bible studies so he knew what God expects of us. His favorite parable was undoubtedly the Good Samaritan because if someone needed help, he would ride to the rescue. Most people who knew him called him “Good-guy Gary” and his nickname was on target. The problem was that he ate up the adulation. He thrived on outperforming others. Despite being well-acquainted with the gospels, he somehow missed the passages on humility. It was apparent to everyone except himself, that his main motivation for living according to God’s law was the self-satisfaction of outdoing others. It made him sanctimonious. Everyone would agree that Gary was a good guy. Everyone also agreed that he was toxic to be around.

Jesus was not questioning the Pharisee’s behavior. He was revealing a deadly attitude that had corrupted him. He had become so pleased with himself that he could no longer see his need for God. He was a self-made man. He had racked up success after success. He was confident in his own abilities because he had proven himself

many times. He even gave his confidence a shot of adrenaline by pointing to a scoundrel and praying, “God, thank you that I am not like that.”

His attitude made it clear to Jesus that he had taken his eyes off the goal because he compared himself with others rather than the person God called him to become. Ernest Hemingway wrote, “There is nothing noble in being superior to your fellow man; true nobility is being superior to your former self.”

Perhaps the Pharisee did not understand the difference between humility and humiliation. Humility and humiliate come from the root word for humble which is the Latin word humus which means soil. Science teaches us that nearly every element on earth was formed in distant stars. When a star explodes at the end of its life, it disperses different elements, scattering the dust which makes up planets.³

Thus, humility is recognizing that no creature should become haughty because all creatures derive from the same basic stuff of creation – literally stardust. Humiliation, on the other hand, is treating someone as if he/she is no more than dirt.

There are some whose core self-image has been so shredded that humility sounds like humiliation. They have been slammed and slurred so many times that calls for humility sound like another attack on their self-esteem. They attempt to inflate their ego through boasting. But bragging rings hollow.

Others who feel dismissed and disparaged fixate on an earlier time in their lives when they were in the spotlight – when they were a star athlete or a straight A student or the number one sales rep. They continuously relive that moment when they were recognized, honored and appreciated. These wounded souls have felt so much humiliation that it is impossible for them to hear someone trumpet the virtues of humility.

That is unfortunate, because humility has nothing to do with demeaning yourself. C.S. Lewis said, “True humility is not thinking less of yourself; it is thinking of yourself less.” It is not a summons to label yourself as an unworthy sinner who can do nothing right. Humility simply accepts the fact that we are limited. Our knowledge, our talents and our ability to do the right thing are limited.

When Jesus praised the tax collector, he was not saluting his behavior. He commended him for coming to his senses; for making an honest personal assessment and admitting that he had failed miserably. Why was that so important? Because once he did, he knew without a doubt that he needed God.

Can you imagine the Pharisee walking out of the temple and saying, “Here are the areas of my life where I need God’s help?” Doubtful. Pride in himself and contempt for others⁴ had led him to put all of his trust in himself. He was cocksure he needed no one.

The Pharisee had forgotten the central truth of faith: we are created in God’s image. That is who we are at our core. Had the Pharisee recognized the divine image within, he never would have tried to boost himself at the expense of another. He would have recognized the divine image in the other man and perhaps taken a cue from his prayer to turn to God.

Humility does not batter our self-confidence. It brings us closer to God which also brings us closer to each other.

Do you need life to clobber you before you realize you need help from a power beyond yourself?

NOTES

1. Robert Holmes, "A Satisfactory Humility," September 23, 2001.
2. Michael Lindvall, "God Has No Grandchildren," September 25, 2011.
3. "Are We Really Made of Stardust?" *physics.org*
4. John Claypool, *Stories Jesus Still Tells*, (Boston: Cowley Publications, 2001), p.135.

Prayers of the People ~ Gregory Knox Jones

God of Creation, we give thanks for your son, Jesus Christ, and for the model he provided us to follow. He came to serve, not to be served, and he called on us to glean the wisdom, to feel the joy and to experience the satisfaction that comes with serving others.

God, we know that we serve best not when we act as if we are better than others, but when we serve in a spirit of true humility. Not belittling or demeaning ourselves, but squelching the impulse to parade our virtues before others.

Mighty God:

Help us to be faithful, but not self-righteous,
Help us to be virtuous, but not stuffy,
Help us to be wise, but not know-it-alls,
Help us to be helpful, but not bossy,
Help us to be devout, but not sanctimonious.

Gracious God, "release us from the idea that we must straighten out other peoples' affairs. With our immense treasure of experience and wisdom, it seems a pity not to let everyone partake of it. But we would like to maintain a few friends...so grant us less self-assurance and more humility. Teach us the important lesson that occasionally we may be wrong."¹

Loving God, we pray that you will help us embrace "the humility that admits its mistakes, realizes its ignorance, recognizes its needs, welcomes advice and accepts constructive criticism. Help us always to praise rather than criticize, to encourage rather than to disparage, to build rather than to destroy and to think of people at their best rather than their worst."²

And, God, this day we pray for members of our church family who grieve the loss of loved ones, for those living in their final days, for those struggling with harsh medical treatments, for those recovering from surgery, for those anxiously awaiting surgery, for those battling addiction, for those trying to find work, for those with fragile marriages, for those with troubled children and for those who are struggling with temptation.

God, we pray that they will turn to you for strength, for wisdom, for guidance, for courage and for hope. And, we pray that we may be open to serving as a conduit for your grace.

Now, hear us as we pray the prayer Jesus taught us to pray together, saying: "Our Father...

NOTES

1. Margot Benary-Isbert shares "Prayer of an Anonymous Abbess"
2. Kathy Schiffer, "Prayer for Humility"