



FIRST CONGREGATIONAL
CHURCH UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST
— Stockbridge, Massachusetts —

Humility

October 27, 2019

Text: Luke 18: 9-14

He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: ‘Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax-collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, “God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax-collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.” But the tax-collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!” I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.’



Sermon:

Going and coming; coming and going from house to holy house back to our homes again—down every byway that is known—as people of faith we are always on the move. We are always moving from one place to the next as part of our journey, and I find it quite ironic that on this very morning I didn’t do it (and it wasn’t because it was raining, although that would be the logical conclusion)—but it was really because this weekend I’m a single parent, and Jakey has a Halloween party this afternoon and because he has that party he woke up this morning at 1:20 AM and said, “Papa, it’s time to get ready for the Halloween party.” And he never really went back to sleep.

So all that is merely to say that one of my favorite things to do on a Sunday morning is actually to hang out on the front steps and on that front pathway—to join the greeters for a time of greeting. It is in part so that I can share that greeting with people. Having a chance to offer hospitality, I can make sure that everyone and anyone who comes through the door knows that they are truly welcome here just as they are. There is something else about that that I find a great gift. Gathering in this room, you are the Body of Christ. You are a mosaic bringing all of your beautiful individuality into this room where none of us are *islands* any longer. One of the joys of being out there is watching the myriad of ways that you arrive—whether by bike or car—and whether with a bounce in your step or barely making it along. I know enough of your stories to look at your faces and realize on some days that are better or worse, being out there is a gift because it helps me to know where you’re coming from, or where you might be going.

As we wrap up the idea of the *Way*—the way that Jesus calls us to live, he tells us about two men in this parable—two men who are coming from their homes to the temple. These two men are coming to exercise their faith through prayer. We are introduced to one as a Pharisee, and if you remember in the Bible, Jesus is often found arguing with the Pharisees. And you’ll hear a lot about tax collectors too—for Jesus is often found eating with them. He argues with the Pharisees and eats with the tax collectors. At that time, it would have represented a totally *upside down* world because despite all their rules and disputes, the Pharisees gave holy living a good try. They took it seriously. They lived every aspect as if what they did informed every other choice that they made in life, and the people on the street thought highly of them.

On the other hand, the tax collectors—those dinner companions—were a different matter. If I said the word **IRS** to you, would that conjure loving thoughts? My apologies to anyone who works for IRS; I’m sure you’re wonderful people. Even today IRS workers do not conjure the same negative qualities as tax collectors in Jesus’ time. That was a whole different matter. You see tax collectors did not work for anyone in the local area; they worked for the Roman Empire. They were often people of faith—people of the community who worked instead with the occupiers. They were told they had to collect money for Rome and there was a certain amount they knew they had to collect, but they weren’t told how to collect it and they weren’t given too much guidance on how much to keep for themselves. So the tax collectors were those people who took your money, skimmed it off the top and sent the rest to the Empire. You can imagine that they didn’t receive lots of dinner invitations, so that’s why they were always available whenever Jesus asked.

We don’t know why the Pharisees and tax collectors came to the temple on that particular day. We know that somehow from very different places, the two of them showed up. The other thing you need to know is that anyone in the temple at that time might have been surprised to see either one of them. For Pharisees, most of their spiritual life and practice occurred in the home. Since they were not big participants in temple life, seeing a Pharisee there prayer might raise some concern, and as to those tax collectors—it’s not certain they showed up that often either. Both of them came to the temple, Luke tells us and sought out their own quiet space. You may not realize it but both of their prayers come from Psalms. We think the Pharisee’s psalm comes out of Psalm 17. Think Job. Think someone trying to justify themselves, saying, “Thanks, God. I’m working really hard. See if you can find something wrong with me.” The tax collector’s psalm had to come from Psalm 51. That was attributed to King David, after he had committed one of the worst sins imaginable. The words went something like, “Break me open, God. Break me open. Create in me a clean heart.” But there they are praying the same thing, asking for the same thing.

If you look in the Bible, if you look at any commentary, if you look at the front of your bulletin, the main difference between these two can be summed up in how they approached what they were doing. It has to do with this idea of humility. It’s an important thing to think about, as we get ready to dedicate our lives, our gift, our time and treasure to this church. CS Lewis talks about humility this way. He says, “Humility is not thinking less of ourselves, but rather thinking less about ourselves.” You see, humility is not an internal or inward facing

thing, but it is always an outward facing thing. If you remember the Pharisee's prayer, then count up the number of times he uses the word I—I as the subject. That prayer is all about him. He tithes. He fasts. He prays. He does everything; yet where that may fall short is in the fact that in the midst of all those practices designed to remind us that we are not an island and designed to remind us that we are connected—somehow led him into a place of the self, inward looking, inward focused.

There is a rabbi whose teachings I often turn to: Lord Jonathan Sachs. He has a brilliant mind and helps me understand some of the principles that are at play here. I want to read you what he has to say about humility in Hebrew Scriptures. He actually says that, "Humility is an appreciation of oneself." Interesting. It's an appreciation of one's talents, one's skills and even one's virtues. He says, "To be humble is not meekness or self-deprecating thought but instead the effacing of oneself to something higher. Humility is not to think lowly of oneself but to appreciate the *self* that one has received." It is a beautiful concept. The way this idea of humility ties into Jesus' way of call upon our lives is this idea of resisting our culture and our time's temptation to turn inward—to focus on what we do, on what we can achieve, and what we have and whether it's enough or not. Instead to always turn outward to the source of where those gifts have come from and to the needs of our brothers and sisters around the world. Because in this parable, Jesus mentions something about their past and who they are. He mentions something about what they're doing in church, but the most important thing he mentions is about future. Both of them left that holy house; both of them went on their way. But it would be that tax collector whom Jesus pointed out was justified, a theological term that simply means, *made right with*. It doesn't mean he's perfect.

In fact, the interesting thing about this parable is something very similar to another parable I know you all know and love. Sharon Ringe compares this parable to the parable of the Prodigal Son. In it there are two characters in it, again one exuding all kinds of good behavior but the younger brother not so much. More importantly, she says that what is really at stake in this particular message is what they do after the fact. In the Prodigal Son, we actually don't know what happens to that young man. Does he grow up to be a good faithful person? One of the clues in Luke is to look at somebody like Zacchaeus—another tax collector. He is the one who meets Jesus on the way and ends up saying, "If I have defrauded anyone, I will pay them back double."

You see, the think Jesus cares most about in this lesson of humility is where we go from here. How does this time and this place, here in this room, transform how we live and act out there. Are we ready to take a humble look at the world—not in a self-deprecating way but rather taking the gifts and talents and skills and blessings that we have and applying them out there for something that matters? There is a song from the Iona Community—a place that has great meaning for me. It is a contemporary inter-ecumenical community in Scotland, housed in an ancient monastery that tries to bring teachings to modern life. They have a song that goes, "Say hey for the carpenter." I'm not sure if this congregation would like that song, quite frankly but it's got some great lyrics in it. The whole idea is what do we need to let go of. What can we let go of in order to really leave this place and serve? The point of the song is that Jesus had to put down his carpenter's tools to get into the life that really mattered to him.

Right after singing about Jesus laying down his carpenter's tools are these words, "Sing hey for the Pharisees leaving their rules; sing hey for the fishermen leaving their nets; sing hey for the people who leave their regrets."

What is it that you need to put down in order to be able to follow Jesus freely? In just a few minutes we're going to bring our pledges forward, demonstrating how we'll support the ministry of this church through our time, talent and through our funds and resources. I would imagine that in your contemplation this past week, if you're like me, there's a bit of Pharisee and a bit of tax collector in you. There's a bit of wondering what the rules are and how to live into them and a bit of wondering whether to just call out for mercy instead. As you come up to place your pledges in this bowl, please take a look and remember this rock right here. Remember him? He's Ebenezer. Ebenezer is the name of the stone that reminds us to give thanks to God. So as you come forward, remember first and foremost to give thanks to God. What we do today is only an act; what we do in the year to come will be the definition of how we've lived into our pledge. Many of you know that one of my favorite hymns is *Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing*. We sang that last week and this week we'll be singing my next favorite one, *There is a Wideness to God's Mercy*. Listen to the last verse of this hymn. I want you to hear and remember as you come forward that that love is cascading down, for that is what this means:

For the love of God is broader than the measure of the mind, and the heart of the Eternal is most wonderfully kind. If our love were but more faithful, we would gladly trust God's word, and our life would be thanksgiving for the goodness of our God.

Friends, that is what not just this morning, but all of our shared life is. It is an act of constantly consecrating ourselves and our gifts into the service and ministry of God—humbly—never self-deprecatingly but courageously.

Amen.



The Rev. Brent Damrow, Pastor