

## THE FIRST PRESBYTERIAN PULPIT

### Two Pockets

A sermon preached on October 28, 2007, by the Rev. Dr. Jeffrey S. O'Neill

**Luke 18:9-14** *He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: <sup>10</sup> "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. <sup>11</sup> 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. <sup>12</sup> I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.' <sup>13</sup> 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!' <sup>14</sup> 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."*

A Jewish proverb advises that each person should wear clothing with two pockets. In one should be carried a parchment on which is written, "You are a child of the most high God." The other should be filled with a mix of dust and ashes. Whenever you are defeated by life, read the parchment; whenever you feel prideful and triumphant, reach into the dust and ashes and be reminded of your finitude and smallness.

It has always seemed a great irony to me that while one of the deepest values of Christianity is founded in Jesus' teachings of humility, there is no more durable and popular a caricature of a Christian than the self-righteous prig. Entering, as we are, another season of political campaigning, we are about to become swamped under a cascade of prideful claims – not only who out-Republicans other Republicans or out-Democrats another Democrat, but which candidate is "more born-again than thou" and which ranks more highly on someone's social policy purity list.

In truth, if you have to point out how good you are, you probably aren't, just as a self-righteous Christian is walking proof that there is something about faith in Christ that he just doesn't get. With even a casual leafing through the pages of the gospels, it would be hard to escape the words of Jesus, as well as the life of Jesus, that teach a compassionate humility as the sign of a healed and redeemed life.

In the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector, we are very nearly doped-slapped with the teaching, as though without it being made painfully obvious, we'd continue to miss it. Perhaps that's the nature of our pride: it makes us insensitive to example, slow on the uptake with hints, and dull to direct instruction. Perhaps humility can only come from humiliation.

Of course, we've been set up to expect the kind of arrogance shown by the Pharisee, who sniffs in a superior way at the despised tax collector nearby. The thing is Pharisees were good people, and the thing is that tax collectors weren't necessarily. Of course, it's our pride that makes blanket judgments like that, but each of these groups had reputations that may not have applied in each personal case, but nonetheless, there it was. You could believe a Pharisee's promise. A Pharisee wouldn't overcharge you in a business deal. You could trust your daughter with a Pharisee. Tax collectors, though, were of the shyster class. You wouldn't leave your wallet lying on the kitchen counter with a tax collector in the house. You wouldn't loan him your watch.

Jesus was well-aware of all the stories. Indeed, he knew and socialized with the people in question, both Pharisees and tax collectors. He would debate weighty theological matters with the one and enjoy a beer with the other, his mind teased by the Pharisees' wit and his heart gladdened by the tax collectors' worldly wisdom.

That the parable he tells is set in a church shouldn't surprise us – after all, there's that caricature again – nor is the Pharisee's prayer any surprise, either. How many times have we said that prayer or something like it ourselves while in church? Like the prim lady that exited church one day and told the pastor how much she appreciated his sermon – every one of the sins he spoke of, she said, applied to someone she knew. We're all more likely to gloat over the speck in another's eye before we're ever ready to fire up the chainsaw against the log in our own.

The point of Jesus' parable is not to congratulate the tax collector for his spiritually sensitive prayer nor attack the Pharisee for his self-righteousness. The Pharisee may be a pretentious prig and an insufferable egoist, but the tax collector is a venal bureaucrat and an agent of an occupying army. And it kind of defeats the lesson if we get all puffed up with ourselves about not being self-righteous like the Pharisee and not dishonest like the tax collector. Let's go ahead and write the prayer: "O God, we modern Presbyterians, comfortable in our middle-of-the-road piety, neither too confident in our faithfulness nor too sorrowful about our failings, thank you that we are not like a Pharisee or a tax-collector!"

The point is that no one stands before God self-justified. We don't earn God's love by garnering purity points, nor do purchase God's sympathy through self-hatred. Beyond the spiritual value of compassionate humility, if the tax collector's prayer was more acceptable – even if his life wasn't – it was because his humility shows a capacity to honestly reflect on his life and, therefore, shows the capacity for growth as a child of God. The Pharisee shows no such likelihood. He has shaped his faithfulness in his own image, and having achieved perfection, where is there to grow?

Now, on the one hand I'd rather trust my money with a Pharisee than with a thief. On the other hand, I would rather be judged by a humble man aware of his failings than by someone who can neither admit to nor show compassion for error.

We live in a time of pious self-righteousness being marketed as a commodity. It infects our politics and our social policies with scorn. It frames life's ambiguities in rigidities. It instills doubt and fear in communities and in systems. It is being promoted by the spiritually misguided and misinformed. It is a distortion of the compassionate humility Jesus taught and embodied. It is not Christlike.

Abraham Heschel said, "I used to admire intelligent people. As I grow older, I admire kind people." Kindness is the residue of humility, of not thinking more highly of ourselves than we should, of being able to imagine others wearing spiritual clothes with two pockets, just as we do. We are bearers of God's graciousness only to the extent we are gracious ourselves.

Corrie Ten Boom, Christian holocaust survivor and author, was asked if it was difficult to remain humble when so many admired her for her strong faith and witness. Her reply is worth remembering: "When Jesus rode into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday on the back of the donkey, and everyone was waving palm branches, throwing garments on the road, and singing praise, do you think for one moment it ever entered the head of that donkey that any of that was for him?"