

HONEST HUMILITY

Text: Luke 18:9-14
LHUMC 10/27/13

I. Introduction

- A. Modern version of the story: “Two people were in church on Sunday. One, a lifetime member of the church, frequent teacher of the Bible, member of the board, prayed, “God, I thank you that my parents brought me to church, taught me the Bible as a youth, planted in my heart a love of and a strong commitment to your will. I give 10 percent off the top, volunteer each month with Habitat for Humanity, tutor underprivileged children at an inner-city school, and never drink to excess. Another man seated near the rear of the church, only muttered, “God have mercy on me, a sinner.” That’s all he could say. You see, when his liquor store went broke, after his marriage dissolved, just before that unfortunate scrape with the law, he had begun coming to church. Thus far, he had not joined the church, nobody had asked him. He was lousy at prayer, didn’t know which words to say. These two persons then went to their homes after church. Frankly, the first guy, the Bible-believing Christian, didn’t get much out of the service. Something was missing. Nothing in the service touched his heart. He already knew the Scripture for the day. Old hat. The music was a repeat of last week. The preacher was conventional. Oh well, maybe next Sunday. The other man stayed seated in his pew long after the benediction, crying, overcome with joy or grief, he knew not which. All he could say to anyone who would listen was, “God loves me.” (*Pulpit Resource*, October-December 2001, p. 16)
- B. It’s a timeless story.
- C. It’s a story, like many of those of Jesus, that we need to be very careful before we make any judgments about any of the characters.
- D. For the first guy, the Pharisee, wasn’t a bad guy.
- E. He was, if nothing else, a righteous man-- doing all the right things in his life—and if everyone was doing what he did, the world would be a better place.
- F. This is one of those stories that is more about what’s on the inside than what’s on the outside.
- G. It’s more about what we get out of our relationship with God than what we put into it.

II. And it is about humility—this concept that like the kids we saw a few minutes ago, a lot of us struggle with. And the story that Jesus tells today makes the point that our struggle with understanding what true and honest humility is is nothing new. As I've pondered the story, here are some conclusions that I have drawn from it.

A. The Pharisee exhibits the truth that sometimes there is a fine line between humility and pride.

1. Or maybe it's as simple as to say that the minute we think we're humble, we're probably not.
2. The Pharisee's main problem was that he had become proud of his humility.
3. The story reminds me of another old Jewish story where there were two old women sitting in the synagogue during the Sabbath service. They happened to overhear the loud lament of a worshipper near them: "God be merciful to me, a nobody! God forgive me, a nobody! God help me, though I'm a nobody!" One of the women looks at the other and says, "Who is this who thinks he's such a nobody?"
4. Which is similar to the comment that Jesus is making at the end of the story.
5. As we look at the Pharisee, he shows us some symptoms of this kind of prideful humility, where it's more about show than substance.
 - a) First is that we spend a lot of effort comparing ourselves favorably to other people. "Thank God I'm not like _____" And we all have people we'd put on the blank.
 - 1) And when we do that, we are passing judgment on the whole person based only on what we see on the outside.
 - 2) When the Pharisee looked to the back of the sanctuary and saw the tax collector, that's all he saw—a tax collector, and he could tell us all how rotten all of those tax collectors were. He had no idea what was going on in the tax collector's heart.
 - 3) The desert fathers, those early Christian monks, had a saying that fits the Pharisee, "There is no other sin than that of being scornful".
 - b) Second, our life of faith has a hidden agenda which is to show others how humble we really are. So in the end, it really isn't hidden at all, it's actually just the opposite.
 - c) Honest humility is not when we look around to see if anyone is watching before we go to our knees before God.

- d) And then like the man in the second version, a sign of prideful humility is that so often we go home empty, from worship or Bible studies or wherever, because we don't think it applies to us, or we don't think we need what God is offering us.
6. Watch this video that shows both the danger of building a life based on pride as well as what the role of true and honest humility can have once we figure it out.
 - a) If you have played Jenga, you know that when the holes start to appear in the tower, there is the danger of imminent collapse.
 - b) So it is when our life is built on false humility—you just can't build a life on something that isn't real and authentic.
- B. So if that's the kind of humble we don't want to be, what does the story teach us about honest humility? A few thoughts:
1. If the tax collector teaches us nothing else it is that we can't ever try to be humble, we either are or we aren't.
 - a) The tax collector wasn't trying to act like he didn't know what to do in church, he really didn't know what to do in church.
 - b) The tax collector wasn't acting like he didn't know how to pray, he really didn't.
 - c) The tax collector wasn't trying to be humble, he really was.
 - d) Perhaps the best lesson we learn from him is maybe that we are most honest in our humility at those moments when we realize, "O Lord, I'm such a sinner" and no one is around to hear us or see us say it except God.
 - e) Don't you get the idea that when you hear the story again that while the Pharisee was well aware that there was someone else with him in the sanctuary that day, and that knowledge undoubtedly shaped his prayer, the tax collector had no idea the Pharisee was there and couldn't have cared less if anyone other than God heard his prayer?
 2. And then one other random thought
 - a) As I was reading about honest humility this week, one character kept popping up as a modern example in a number of things that I read. It was the new pope, Pope Francis. What an interesting person he is!
 - b) Do you think that a pope who works in soup kitchens and drives his own car and lives in a simple apartment and makes cold calls to people out of the blue might have something to teach all Christians about humility?

- c) Here is what one article said about him, “Pope Francis recognizes the power of humility. Why would the most powerful religious leader in the world decline traditional trappings of status and authority, reach out the marginalized, and dare to affirm that ministry with the poor is at the heart of the Christian vocation? Francis humbles himself thus because he knows that (this kind of) loving presence changes hearts, transforms lives, and revitalizes communities.” (“Pope Francis: Holy Humility in Community”
www.odysseynetworks.org/news/)
- d) That quote about the power of honest humility took me back to the original story with a question—When they both came out of the synagogue that day, which one, the Pharisee or the tax collector, would you rather follow into ministry out into the world? Which one would be doing it for the right reasons?

III. Conclusion—And then a couple of final thoughts:

- A. As I often say about parables, never forget that the vast majority of parables that Jesus tells aren’t about what they first appear to be.
 - 1. In other words, this parable isn’t really about the Pharisee or the tax collector.
 - 2. Who it really is about is God.
 - 3. It is really about a God who would be audacious enough to justify not the Pharisee at the end of the story, but the tax collector.
- B. Willimon gives the moral of the story this way: “Perhaps, when you are on top of the world, when you can say the words of the Apostles Creed by heart...when you have never ever disappointed your parents, when you know the Bible and have a ready verse on the tip of your tongue, when prayer comes easily, you don’t need a gift from God. What can God do for you? Rejoice, you are well fixed, spiritually speaking. Sunday worship becomes a time to celebrate your gifts, to count your blessings, enumerate your virtues. “God I’m thankful that I’m not needy, empty, confused, bereft like (some other people I know). But if you are down and out, empty handed, unsteady, unsure, then this story may be yours. Rejoice. Hold out your empty hands to receive the gift. We call it grace. Unmerited, free grace. It’s amazing. Don’t worry about what you ought to say to God. Listen for what God has to say to you. Don’t trouble yourself about what you ought to do for God. Let God do for you.” (*Pulpit Resource*, October-December 2001, p. 17) It’s about God, not the Pharisee or the tax collector.

C. In the Eastern Orthodox Church there is a traditional prayer called the Jesus Prayer.

1. It goes like this, “Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me, a sinner.” Sound familiar? The Jesus Prayer is the tax collector’s prayer.
2. And the practice of that prayer is that one is to pray it repeatedly, over and over.
3. And so I know what you are thinking—What a downer—to pray over and over that I am a sinner.
4. But if you were to try it sometime, what you would discover first is that it has the power to draw a person deeper into a relationship with the One, the only One, who can truly forgive us of those sins.
5. And even more than that, you soon realize in praying that prayer simply how much you need God.
6. And maybe that’s the key to the whole thing. To be honest in our humility is simply to realize not how much God needs us, but how much we need God.
7. That was the difference between the Pharisee and the tax collector.
8. One thought that God couldn’t get along without him—the other knew that he couldn’t get along without God.
9. To know that none of us, even at our absolutely best moments in life when we think we have it all figured out, none of us can get along without God—that is the reality that leads us to honest humility.
10. Thanks be to God for the forgiveness and love that he gifts us with in response to our honest humility.