

A Modest Faith - A Subtle Shift In Grammar

Year C

Season of Pentecost

Sunday Between October 23 and October 29 Inclusive

October 24, 2010, 22nd Sunday After Pentecost

Read the Bible passage: [Luke 18:9-14](#), The Message; or [Luke 18:9-14](#), The New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).

Faith-provoking, historical insights into the lesson by [David Ewart, Luke 18:9-14](#) .

Click here: [George Hermanson's sermon](#), for an easy to print or email Adobe PDF version of this sermon.

The Rev. Dr. George Hermanson

Note: This sermon was preached October 28, 2007 at Edwards (Knox) United Church.

Journey with the Pharisee as he comes to the temple with expectation. He is actually singing “Amazing Grace” as he enters. There are tears in his eyes as he prays. He feels this stuff. He is full of gratitude for his life. He is overflowing with religious emotion, for he does feel blessed. Talk to him at the door, and ask what about the tax collector? He will tell you, “There but for the grace of God go I.”

Watching the tax collector we see him wipe his eyes, blow his nose and he returns to his life. It is not an honorable job. Society may look down on him but he cannot see any other option. Somebody has to do this nasty business and he is struck with it. So, tomorrow he will make his rounds, collecting taxes from his neighbours, hand some of it over to the evil empire, and put some aside for himself.

This is how the story is meant to be seen. To see the toll collector as honorable and the Pharisee as a creep makes the story false. When it is false, it becomes a dishonest morality tale, and it easily becomes anti-Semitic. When it is false we can fall into trap - see the Pharisee in the most negative way we can. We can end up saying, “God, we thank you we are not like this Pharisee.” We can end with a sense of superiority. To really get the point, we need to see the two for whom they are. The Pharisee a generous and committed man. The toll collector as a compromised, certified stinker.

Think of it this way. Would we not rejoice in having such a committed member as the Pharisee? He would never miss a Sunday. He would give 10% of his income. And he thanks God that he can do that. The Pharisee is the person we count upon to feed the hungry, visit the sick, pay the bills, and teach the lessons. It is this deep commitment of one who lives their spiritual discipline that holds the community together. He is a better man than I am.

Given this, why is he not the hero of the story? What is so wrong with this payer of his? It is close to prayers of gratitude we find in scripture and devotional literature. The psalmist says, "I have avoided the ways of the violent." Have we not thanked our lucky stars we have escaped a certain problem or sin?

So we have another reversal story for the hero is the outcast. Because he is the hero we see the good man caught in conceit or hubris.

The story is about spiritual conceit. It is about having an over heightened sense of self. It is a reminder that what we think is good sometimes blinds us to a wider truth. It is about a sense of entitlement. It is a confidence that our way is the true way, and not question that there might be a better way. The story pushes us to a more modest sense of our faith. A clue to this is the over confidence of the Pharisee and the modesty of the tax collector.

One little word gives the Pharisee away. It is a very subtle shift in grammar. Listen to the words that separate. He doesn't say, "I share the same temptations we all face." He doesn't say, "I could have slipped and sinned and I am thankful I am not living my life as thief, rouge, or tax collector." He says, "Thank God I am not like them." "God, I thank you that I am not like other people"

Really? Here is the shift in speech. It is a move from the grammar of gratitude to the grammar of elitism. It is hubris. Thinking one is better than others. It is a shift, from we share a common humanity, to them and us.

It is a very subtly line and we almost never notice when we cross it. But if we listen closely to our language we notice how it gives us away. Listen to self-made language - "we have it made." "I am ok and you are not." This shift in grammar reveals our unconscious rejection of shared humanity. We show our unexamined beliefs every time we use us - them language. Whenever we say, "Why can't they be like us?"

Feel the distance in the Pharisee's speech, in the word "this:" "this tax collector." Now he has stopped praying and started peeking. A spiritual competition is going on. Self-righteousness is creeping into the equation. A spiritual pride makes the prayer empty. The tax collector could have had the same problem if he had prayed, "Thank God my prayer is more modest than his."

We are invited to join the psychology and spirituality of the tax collector. He is not scanning the room as he prays. He is focused in on his own collection. He is not saying, "I am worse than that person." He does not notice the slips made in worship. He is focused on God. He knows he is at war with himself. He is hungry for release.

There are questions that ought not be asked except by those who are famished for an answer. To really want an answer means a realistic look at ourselves. To know one is broken; is in need of restoration. To know the condition of one's heart is the beginning to finding the answer.

One of my sources of my spiritual grounding is the blues. Van Morrison's Hymns to the Silence has become the sound track of my soul. It floats around me and catches me in moments of solitude. It speaks to me of my journey, the things that have made me, the yearning for depth in prayer. It reflects a nostalgia for the

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May the Lure be with you

innocence of youth, time that is gone, and a longing for a safe place to be ... the thirst for God. There is a spirit of rejuvenation and rebirth in Morrison's blues - there is no us and them. He sings:

No matter where I roam / I will find my way back home / I will return to the Lord.

The point of the story is the old one - "know yourself." The beginning of deep spiritual examination begins here. This is not a beating oneself up, but a prayer of have mercy on me. It is a modest understanding of oneself - that I need others to be more fully myself. I don't have to go it alone.

We don't have to prove ourselves by showing others, or God, how good we are. We act because it makes the most sense for all to act this way. We are not proving any moral superiority. It is just our habit.

This habit is not formed by oughts or shoulds. God doesn't knock us over the head. No great ought only a tender mercy of: "Have you thought about it, in this way?" A whispered word of love that may give us a wider perspective. The thinking from the perspective of the other, the common good slides into our moral calculus, shaping us in we are journeying together, seeking love and healing.

When we see our claims to truth to be modest, this frees us to speak more boldly. Biblical wisdom can play a part in the answer to the question of what it means to live together. We recognize that biblical wisdom is a wisdom about a God who acts with the power of persuasion, and we use that wisdom to enter our voice in the dialogue about ethical actions. Together with others of good will we seek a strategy and social structures that will reflect our best insights. It is to say, "Have you thought of this, in this way?" Here is a modest proposal - "we think this will add beauty to what we are doing." "Here is something that has worked for the common good, think about it."

Faith gives us a language to think about the world. It offers an alternative language of power. It moves us from elitism to tender mercies. It creates a language of inclusion, of all are welcome in the kingdom. It moves us from me, from my group, to the well being of all - to seek those excluded. The poor are no longer "welfare recipients" or even "fellow citizens." They're "neighbours" our brothers and sisters. This happens when we let faith define our world and provide a language for thinking about this world. This is to look at the world from God's side.

With the eye of God we look inward to our state being. Prayer can help us see ourselves as we are without imposing negative judgments on ourselves and others. Prayer reminds us that no matter where we roam we can find our way home again. God's tender mercies call us home and we are filled with light enough to return home.

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