

Plymouth Congregational Church of Fort Wayne, UCC
October 23, 2016

**“What Content of Character
Measures our Humanity?”**

**“Jesus told this parable to some who trusted
in themselves that they were righteous
and regarded other with contempt.”**

Luke 18:9

PRELUDE

The parable we have in our morning lesson
sounds simple enough.

We might well listen and conclude:
we have a good guy and bad guy
and the test is to see if we can
tell the one from the other.

If so, good for us. And Luke has made it
rather easy, telling us the parable was told
for the benefit of people who trusted in
themselves and who looked upon others
with contempt. Or, as one translation
reads: it was told for **“people who thought
they were better than others and who looked
down upon everyone else”**(Cont. Eng. Ver.).

I recall this lesson from my youth.
More so than some others,
as it registered a strong imprint
upon heart and mind.

It is sparingly told – just a few verses.
It is easily seen and visualized.
The setting is the temple in Jerusalem;
“a house of prayer for all people”(Isaiah 56:7).
But not all people are praying from the
same page, and not all people embody
the same spirit.

Can you “see” the two men?

The one confident and proud,
the other uncertain and contrite.

Both stand, a traditional positioning for prayer.

Both are detached and separate
from any group association.
The Pharisee: standing by himself;
the tax collector: standing at a “distance.”

They are solitary figures, far from the crowd,
clearly set apart,
from each other or any other.

But the one – the Pharisee - is head up
and looking out;
the other – the tax collector - is
bent, curved, cast down,
looking in.

This body language is
different and distinguishing;
not that one disqualifies the other;
but it reveals, in part, the inner attitude
operating in each.

The Pharisee is full of thanksgiving;
of all the ways my life could have turned out,
I’ve turned out commendable to me.
I’m a good person; and I’m a religious person.

The tax collector is not so
buoyant in his prayer;
he is weighted with concern, heavy laden we
might say, aware of some internal disconnect
that needs amendment by grace; he pleads mercy
for divine initiation to resolve whatever rift

that exists within; something is broken in the tax collector, and it is beyond his capacity to fix or mend what probably was of his own making.

These two say their prayers,
then head home.
One prayer was heard;
and one was not.

Scholars counsel that we need be careful in drawing hasty conclusions about these two.

They point out that Luke has, at best, a prejudiced attitude about Pharisees; at worst, he shows contempt for those who hold others in contempt.

As Christians it is easy to draw a conclusion based upon an interpretation:

- the Pharisees are the Jews;
- the prayer of the Pharisees is corrupt at the core, and not a prayer that gains attention. It doesn't get "through."

Some may recall, that was a thought once expressed by Bailey Smith of the Southern Baptist Convention some 36 years ago this month. God does not hear the prayer of the Jew, Smith contended; only prayers offered in Jesus' name got God's attention.

It is not an example of clear thinking. I can't imagine God nullifying or discrediting the prayers Jesus prayed, or the prayer Jesus taught.

Jesus didn't pray in Jesus' name.
I'm guessing he simply said:
"O God, you know who's calling."
As indeed God does.

Jew and Christians are often rather chummy these days, rarely contesting the validity of what prayers may be offered. Not so, though, for the Muslim. For some Christians those prayers are questioned, if not denied, access to the Most High.

John Dominic Crossan, in an attempt to avoid a negative stereotyping in this lesson, suggested an alternative modern equivalent as follows:

"A Pope and a pimp went to St. Peter's to pray." This was intended to strike a pause, that we might not immediately assume whose prayer was favored (see B. Brandon Scott, p. 94).

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I hope we can relate in some way to both of these, depending upon different circumstances that may play upon our lives.

Sometimes the "cup runneth" over and we can't help but exclaim: Thanks be to God! What a wonderful world. And what a blessing to practice faith filled with awe and appreciation.

Or, "my goodness, my connection with myself, with others, has taken terrible turns; and I can't begin to fix what fault I know is mine. "O Lord, have mercy."

The two prayers doesn't cancel each other.
There are seasons of life merited for each.

And yet. And yet.

The author of Luke has an issue with
those who build themselves up at the expense
of others, whose estimate of self is so great
that others simply don't count; they don't matter.
They can be seen. But they are not understood.

This is the case for the Pharisee,
who had religion sufficient to be virtuous;
but he suffered a deficit of compassion,
he lacked empathy and understanding of others;
he was religious enough to pray;
 but his prayer took an unnecessary detour,
 from thanksgiving for what he was,
 to judgment of the other who he was not.

The “empathy wall.” Arlie Russell Hoschschild,
socialist from Berkeley, CA, went to Louisiana
to see if she could understand a people there
who see the world in such a different way.

Berkeley: foreign films, recycling bins,
gluten free, bike lanes; Louisiana: prayer,
fried food, petrochemicals; where obedience
is putting up with things the way they are ...
“Pollution is the sacrifice you make for capitalism.”
Louisiana, the second poorest state in the nation;
where the unofficial state motto is:
“Thank God for Mississippi!”

Is it possible, Hoschschild asks: **“without
changing beliefs, to know others from the
inside, to see reality through their eyes ...”**

Hoschschild wants to cross what she calls
the **“empathy wall.”** She finds people who

know their world and who are willing to endure it. But do they know themselves?

Compassion is not a popular virtue. Very often when I talk to religious people, and mention how important it is that compassion is the key, that (compassion) is the sine-qua-non of religion, people look kind of balked, and stubborn sometimes, as much to say, what's the point of having religion if you can't disapprove of other people?

Karen Armstrong

We have much going on in this place.
Trying to keep up our appearances.
Trying to stay engaged with mission partners.
We will be wise when we hope and pray
to be the best we can be - not as compared to
some others, not measuring ourselves by
the standards set by others, but by our own.
And if we excel in any way, may it simply be to credit
the grace of God, and to glorify God's name.

Amen.

*(Sermons are typically composed in haste,
for the demands of the day are many;
so be charitable as you read; and remember:
the contents of this sermon have not been edited
and may or may not have been a part of its public presentation)*