

The Sunnybrook Pulpit

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October 27, 2019

A House for All Sinners and Saints

If you walk around with your nose in the air, you're going to end up flat on your face, but if you're content to be simply yourself, you will become more than yourself. – Luke 18:9-14

Leo Tolstoy began his great novel *Anna Karenina* with one of the great lines in literature: “All happy families are alike. Every unhappy family is unhappy in its own unique way.” There are so many things that can create tension in a family, a community, or the wider world. Each of those things leaves its scars on the human heart, and a wounded heart contributes to new tensions that breed new wounds.

In the story we heard today, Jesus tells about two people praying, and in their prayers we learn the condition of their hearts. More than anything else our prayers reveal the state of our hearts. It is one of the best reasons to pray, so that we can bring the desires of our hearts before God and decide whether our desires are really worthy of God’s attention.

Both of these guys have wounded hearts, and both of them react to those wounds in quite different ways. One is a respectable leader in the community. Others look up to him but he is still wounded, and you can hear it in his prayer: “I am so grateful that I am not like other people. I am so grateful that I am superior to others.” He is insecure, and trying to bolster his self-esteem by looking down on other people.

Perhaps you see yourself in this character. Perhaps you find yourself looking down on others, building up your self-esteem by cataloguing the ways in which you are better than them. I certainly see myself in this character. I sometimes think like that. I am grateful to be who I am, and there is nothing wrong with gratitude, but sometimes my gratitude slips over into pride. I thank God that I have enough money for the things I need and want because I don’t spend it on beer or lottery tickets or the motor home I can’t afford, unlike the over-mortgaged family down the street. I thank God that I’m not one of those self-righteous Christians who think that they’re the only ones who are right, but in doing so, I become one of those self-righteous Christians, convincing myself that Christians like me

are better than the other kind. This is an insidious thing, pride. It is so easy to become proud of being humble!

But even if you don't initially see yourself in this character, the truly great thing about this parable is that it is a trap, a quite wonderful trap. You don't like this guy. He is full of pride and his prayer is one that glories in how much he is better than others. He's arrogant, pompous and puffed up, but if you start thinking that you are better than him, if you feel grateful that you aren't like him, do you see what just happened? You have fallen into the trap. You become him, even in the act of disliking him.

The Pharisee is described as "standing by himself." It is a little detail, but in these stories details are often important clues. He is standing by himself because his attitude isolates him from others. In needing to be superior, and *over* other people, he is prevented from being *with* them. He is alone, and likely he is lonely as well. And when we fall into the trap of thinking this way, we too become isolated, our ability to be with others in community is undermined.

This pride also contributes to racial, ethnic and class tensions, which are rooted in beliefs about the ways some are superior to others. The Pharisee in Jesus' story stands for all of those ways in which we look down on other people in order to avoid our responsibility, all those ways in which we look down on others rather than trying to really understand them, all those ways in which we look down on others rather than being in community with them.

And then there is the other character, this tax man. Nobody likes taxes, and often those entrusted to collect them get the brunt of that dislike, but in ancient Palestine, tax collectors were especially hated because they were also collaborating with the Roman occupiers. They were despised for enriching themselves at the expense of their own community. And this tax collector is feeling all the weight of that shame. He enters the presence of God but stands far off, unable to lift his head or stand up straight. And his prayer is a simple one: "God, give mercy. Forgive me, a sinner."

This is a better prayer, because it is a more honest prayer. It is honest about the wounds on his heart. Instead of trying to build up his self-esteem at the expense of other people, the tax man admits that he has no self-worth of his own. What we don't acknowledge we can't change, and because he acknowledges his wounded heart, he is open to change, he is open to healing, he is open to being right with God.

It is a better prayer, but it still isn't a great prayer. In truth, neither of these guys is really very healthy, and their prayers reflect their lack of health. One of them is full of pride, the other full of self-recrimination. One looks down on others, thinking he is better than them. The other looks down on himself, unable to recognize a God who loves him just as he is.

I really believe that rather than looking down on others or looking down on ourselves, we need to learn to laugh at ourselves. Laughter, I think, is one of the greatest signs of health. I think that we need to learn to look at our failings, our problems, our faults and flaws, with something like a sense of humour, not trivializing them, but also not taking ourselves so seriously.

I want to close by telling you a true story, a story about how people, even in the face of deep differences, be a community of joy. This story comes from Rev. Bev Johnston, who at one time was the minister in St. Paul's United Church in Grand Prairie, Alberta. In the early 1950's there was a coffee gathering at the café on main street once a week. Most of those who attended that coffee gathering were members of St. Paul's, but one was Paddy Croken, a local business leader who happened to be a devout Roman Catholic. At a time when Protestants and Catholics rarely fraternized in public, his presence was refreshing, and one of the things that made Paddy welcome was that he had a delightful sense of humour.

Now at the time, the United Church was engaged in a fundraising campaign. They were planning to replace their small, aging building with a much larger one. The building project was a topic of great interest to most of the participants in this coffee group, and that was how Paddy learned about it. A short time later, Rev. Bev received a letter from him. The letter read as follows: "Dear Bev: I understand that St. Paul's is planning to build a new church. As you know, it is against my religion to designate money for construction of a new Protestant church. However, enclosed, you will find a sum of money to help tear down the old one. Sincerely, Paddy."

May we find the grace to reach out across the walls that divide us, so that we can become a community of laughter and joy. Amen!