

A MESSAGE OF HUMILITY IN A CULTURE OF SELF-EXALTATION

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Good morning!

“For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.”

What a simple message! Any questions? Shall I just sit back down and we’ll skip ahead? But no, that wouldn’t be doing justice to the *difficulty* of *living* this message, putting it into practice. Humility doesn’t necessarily come easy in our society.

There’s the cultural side of this. Our culture tells us over and over again to exalt ourselves. We compete for acceptance into colleges and then we start competing for jobs, which means puffing up the resume and putting our best foot forward. Then there’s self-exaltation through status, fueled by marketing and the consumer economy.

I had a nasty virus for much of the last two weeks – not COVID, three tests, all negative – and I passed a lot of the time by watching the baseball playoffs. It was the first round, four series, best-of-five, going all at once! Many hours of baseball every day! At least my virus was well-timed in that way.

But it got me thinking about car ads on TV – there were a lot of them. We’re supposed to want our car to exalt us – to make us appear powerful, stylish, cool. And we’re supposed to drive it fast! In the wintertime we’re supposed to go out in the mountains with our all-wheel drive, burn up a lot of gas, and blast through the snowdrifts. Actually, as an adult white male, I think I’m supposed to be driving a big ol’ pickup truck – not a middle-of-the-road hybrid sedan.

Did you ever try to make a left turn out of the Ossining Public Library parking lot late in the afternoon on a weekday? It requires somebody in the backed-up line of cars coming up Croton Ave. to see you, have mercy, stop, and let you in. I don’t remember ever seeing a car ad on TV that showed that. There are no car ads that showcase safe and *considerate* driving. It’s more like “Let’s leave everyone else in the dust.” This is just one example, of course, but consumer marketing is pervasive, and very often it aims to make us feel the need to exalt ourselves in one way or another. Let’s not even get started on social media... for all it does to connect us in positive ways, make no mistake, the end game is to sell us stuff.

But apart from the culture of consumerism, we all do have an inner need to feel good about ourselves. If we were to make the tax collector a role model for *our* lives, go around always feeling unworthy and disparaging ourselves, it probably wouldn’t be healthy. Psychologists warn about the effects of too much “negative self-talk.” We all need a little self-esteem to be able to get out of bed in the morning, find our way, and try to make a difference in the world.

Thankfully, Jesus’ parable gives us a pretty *extreme* example of self-exaltation. Pharisees were generally educated, respected, middle-class people: teachers and scholars. Some of them were scribes and some were rabbis. They were political moderates who didn’t support the Roman occupation but also did not advocate violent revolution. So overall – not so different from Jesus in some ways. Where they did differ, dramatically, was in the Pharisees’ near-obsession with Jewish law – the Torah, other written scriptures, and even laws passed down through oral tradition. They believed that Israel’s relationship God depended on total adherence to Jewish law. Follow all the rules, ALL the rules, and you’re good. (By the way, *Paul* was actually raised as a Pharisee and still considered himself a Pharisee even after his conversion. More on Paul in a few minutes...)

But back to our Pharisee in today's gospel... He brags about his own righteousness, his following of the rules. Apparently, he does this out loud, not only in public but *to God*. And for good measure he trash-talks other people – out loud and to God – to make himself feel superior. Rather than *praising God* in his prayer, he praises himself.

The tax collector is at the other extreme. Tax collectors were despised not only because they were Jews who worked collecting money for the occupying Roman authorities... they were also widely known to cheat people, by charging them more tax than they really owed and then pocketing the difference.

This tax collector at least recognizes that he needs God in his life... and to have that he needs to ask God's forgiveness for his sins. And because he does so, humbly and sincerely, he goes back to his home "justified" – which means right with God or accepted by God. Maybe he even changed his ways and stopped overcharging? Jesus doesn't extend the story that far, because his main point is about humility and asking forgiveness. But we can hope so.

Which character do we identify with in this reading? In our lives, our education, and our occupations, most of us are probably more like the Pharisee. We're not going out and cheating people every day to enhance our income. So the parable tells us to recognize that even as we strive to be good and fair and honest, we will never be perfect. We do have faults and sins, and we need to acknowledge this and ask God for forgiveness. Because: how can we have a relationship with God, how can we be close to God, unless we're right with God? And getting right with God – getting right in *any* relationship, really – requires forgiveness.

There's slightly different take on this theme in Matthew, chapter 6. It's part of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. I'm sure this comes up in the lectionary but let me just summarize a bit. Jesus says we should *not* pray like the hypocrites who stand and pray where they can be seen by others. He says, "Truly I tell you, they have received their reward." Meaning: their *only* reward is that of being seen by others. It implies that they're not really in relationship with God. Jesus says it's better to pray in secret, and God will see in secret and reward us. He urges us to give to charity and do good works also in secret, so that our motivation will be pure – not seeking praise, esteem, or status, but only to do good.

When you've done this... some good deed, in secret... didn't it feel different – and better – down inside?

I can't sit down today without going back to Paul and today's Epistle. And I can't help but wonder if it was kind of a subversive choice by the Common Lectionary to pair up this reading with today's Gospel. Because some of what Paul writes is *a lot like* what the Pharisee says in Jesus' parable! Jesus addresses the parable to "some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous." And Paul writes: "From now on there is reserved for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will give me on that day." Is there an echo in here?

Now, to be fair to Paul – and let's focus the fairness on this one issue because there are others – he didn't have the Gospel of Luke and so he may not have been familiar with the parable in today's Gospel. He *was* one of the all-time most zealous followers and promoters of Christianity. There's some question as to whether Christianity would have survived in those years without him. And in contrast to the Pharisee in the parable, who's living a comfortable life, Paul had suffered for his faith and is thought to have written this letter from prison. And in this passage, he *does* recognize others who will share in his reward... he asks for forgiveness for those who deserted him... and he praises God.

Still, he also does exactly what Jesus warns against in the parable – he exalts himself. He trusts in himself that he is righteous. Maybe, being not just a tireless and heroic Christian but also a Pharisee from way back, he just couldn't help himself.

So from Paul and our tax collector, I think we can take heart that there's hope for us all. As it says in Psalm 139, God has searched us and known us... God is acquainted with *all our ways*. That means the triumphs and the good deeds... and whatever darkness there is in us.

God wants us to pray with humility, to acknowledge our faults and missteps, and to ask forgiveness. And God grants us forgiveness in return.

Amen.

Readings: Joel 2:23-32, 2 Timothy 4:6-8,16-18, Luke 18:9-14