

## It Could be Worse...I Could be Him!

[Text - Luke 18:9-14]

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In this morning's New Testament reading, Jesus tells a parable that gives us a peek into the lives of two people who are praying. One is a respectable Pharisee; the other, a reprehensible tax collector. Two people, in two different spaces of the temple, praying to the One same God. Each man describes his personal situation as he honestly sees it. However, the mood and content of their prayers clearly differs; and in the end, only one of them - the tax collector - goes home "justified". Now, what is *justified*, isn't necessarily the tax collector's way of life, or way of making a living. Nor is it the Pharisee's way of life, or charitable giving, that's being criticized. Jesus is telling this parable to people who trust in [and even *brag* about] their own righteousness, while regarding others with contempt and disdain. It seems that the main point Jesus is making, is that we don't need to put-down others in order to build-up ourselves. In other words, Life is *not* a Presidential Debate - or a competition! Life is a *gift* - a precious gift that is given to each of us. And according to Jesus, *all* of us are completely loved by the Creative Source who gives us this marvelous gift. Unfortunately, when people forget this, and try to exalt themselves before God as being better than others, they not only disparage others, they also diminish themselves.

The Pharisee in Jesus' parable is obviously driven by the need to feel superior. In fact, it's how his prayer begins: "God, I thank you that I am not like other people...!" Then he goes on to list some of the other people he's glad not to be like: "Thieves, rogues, adulterers, and certainly not like that tax collector over there!" The Pharisee doesn't even know this person, or his name. He simply pigeonholes him in the category of corrupt "tax collector", and immediately judges him as being morally inferior. That's a really harsh judgment; yet I think I understand why the Pharisee might do this. Whenever people view Life as a competition, they will always be looking for someone who seems worse-off than they are. "I may have my faults, but at least I'm

not as bad as *him!*” And so we build themselves up by pulling or putting others down. Yet Jesus tells us that we don’t need to live our lives this way. Life is *not* a competition! And there’s certainly no need to try to compete for God’s love!

One of the great ironies this parable raises, is that it’s often a person’s *religion* that lies at the root of that competitiveness - making the very thing that’s supposed to unite us, actually drives us apart. It’s as if we believe that the Omnipotent, Omnipresent Source of Life and Love is too small to embrace us all. Therefore we must somehow compete for God’s attention and favor. And unfortunately, until a person learns to let-go of that kind of competitive, self-justifying religion, he or she will never be able to take-hold of the marvelous abundance of Divine Love and Grace. In Jesus’ story the Pharisee is undoubtably a highly religious person. He’s a tither, who gives one-tenth of all his income to charitable causes. He also fasts two times a week - another commendable practice. This Pharisee, like many Pharisees in Jesus’ day, displays an outwardly upstanding life. However, this highly religious person, like so many others, is sorely lacking in his ability to simply *trust* in the Goodness of God.

Genuine faith in God should allow people to not only trust in God’s love for *them*, but also for others. It should help us realize that we don’t have to make ourselves acceptable to God, especially by pointing to others as being “unacceptable”. Yet this is the danger of *any* religion that isn’t centered in Divine Love and Grace. Unfortunately, there is a great deal of bigotry and brutality that can be found in the writings of most religious traditions - including our own! And people who refuse to look at their Sacred Scriptures from an objective and historical perspective, often have a hard time letting-go of those primitive and barbaric passages and images. So it’s no wonder that rigid, religious people look around for others to condemn: “God, get them, not me! He’s a tax collector, she’s an adulterer, he’s gay, she’s a left-leaning-liberal-lesbian - from Lebanon no less! God, I know you’re into smiting sinners, so please go after them; just don’t pulverize me!”

Basically, it all boils-down to how we understand and experience the One we call "God." If we truly believe that we must somehow appease and earn the favor of an angry and vengeful deity, it will naturally lead to a pious life of self-defensive posturing. However, if you and I truly believe - and trust - that "God *is* Love" [1 John 4:8], and that "God so loved the *world*..."[John 3:16], we are set-free to live our lives in ways that are open and honest, compassionate and caring.

"Two people went up to the temple to pray" - to essentially plead their case before God. One of them tries extremely hard to show God just how good he is. He speaks very highly about his own personal accomplishments - all the while, looking down with contempt on the lives of others. He basically tells God that he is proudly satisfied with his life. In fact, he makes such a good case for himself, that there's really nothing left for God to do. This man is so full of religious piety that there's no room, or need, for Divine help or grace! Therefore, he goes away empty-handed. The other person has nothing to brag about, and nothing to prove. He comes to simply acknowledge his human frailty and failings, and to seek Divine forgiveness and grace. He comes - not to proudly *tell* God - but to humbly *ask* God. Therefore, God can - and does - respond, with forgiveness, compassion and grace. And so this man goes home, justified.

"For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted." Being humble in the presence of the Holy One doesn't mean we need to beat ourselves up, or put ourselves down. It simply means that we acknowledge that we need help in order to live as authentic and caring children of our Divine Source. And just as most human parents will gladly help their children when asked, so our Heavenly Parent responds to you and me with the inspiration and support we need. The beautiful thing about this is that our Divine inspiration and support comes to us wrapped in human form - in the person of Jesus Christ, and in the down-to-earth people gathered here today as the Body of Christ. People who can share their strengths and their weaknesses, their successes and failings, their fears and their faith. People who recognize that we're not here to

*compete* for Divine Compassion and Grace, but to freely *share* it -  
trusting that there really is plenty for everyone!