So Good You’re Bad (And Vice Versa)
2Timothy 4:6-8; Luke 18:9-14
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Theme: Humility knows that all stand equal before God.

God of our Mothers and Fathers, God of heritage and change, God of memory and promise, grant us the courage to listen to your word to us in scripture in such a way that we are not only comforted, but, if need be, that we are discomforted as well. And now may the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my Rock and My Redeemer.

There’s an old preacher’s tale I can’t resist telling. It’s apocryphal to be sure, but true to human nature. Once upon a time there was a monk, perhaps of the Carmelite order, who was comparing the various Roman Catholic monastic orders, noting their peculiar strengths and weaknesses. He said that those of the Dominican order in fact did more preaching than his order. He allowed that the Jesuits had greater intellectual accomplishments than any other monastic order. But, he concluded, “Nobody, absolutely nobody, can beat us at humility.”

A second story, a tale from one of those fraternity house “truth sessions.” It’s fresher perhaps, but probably just as legendary. One May at the end of his pledge year, a college sophomore is reputed to have offered the following confession to his brothers: “When I came here I was very conceited. But I got cut down a peg. I listened. I got into activities, and now I’m one of the best guys around here.”

“The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector....’” The tax collector, on the other hand, “would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, ‘God, be merciful to me a sinner!’”

A simple parable this, short and to the point. The puffed-up Pharisee is easy to dislike; the humble tax collector is just as easy to like. This is one of those Jesus

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parables that go down easy – way too easy. We all identify with the humble tax-collector. He knows he’s bad, knows it so well that he’s actually good. And it’s easy to throw mental rotten tomatoes at the goody-two-shoes Pharisee. He’s so good he’s bad.

But this parable would not have gone down so easy with the crowd Jesus told it to. And if we try to hear it as they would have heard it two thousand years ago, it doesn’t go down so easy with us either. What we miss, what that crowd would have gotten with a vengeance, has to do with who Pharisees were and who tax collectors were.

These Pharisees were not the arrogant, legalistic, prudish cartoons of self-righteousness that we’ve made them out to be. Pharisees were good religious folks who were just trying to take their religion seriously. They were honest to a fault; they were dependable. Pharisees were upstanding; Pharisees were responsible and accountable. They served on the committees, they went to the board meetings, they kept dandelions out of their lawns, they picked up after their dogs, and they drove 35 when the speed limit was 35. They ran the PTA. Good grief, they were probably Presbyterians!

So… for Jesus to put an arrogant, judgmental, self-righteous prayer on the lips of a decent, hard-working, clean-living Pharisee would have rankled a lot of his listeners.

And then there were tax collectors. Jesus carefully chose a figure bound to give the maximum level of offence to the maximum number of people. Roman tax collecting, you have to realize, was something of a franchise operation. You bought a license that allowed you to extort as much money as you could from your neighbors. You, the tax collector, only had to pay some of that money back to Rome; you got to pocket the difference. First-century tax collection was veritably state-sponsored extortion. And Jewish tax collectors were judged traitors to their nation, as well. They were as despised in the same way that, say, pimps and crack dealers are rightly despised today. So, knowing this, you might want to update “The Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector,” and call it, let’s say, “The Parable of the Presbyterian Minister and the Crack Dealer.”
What we have to accept is the fact that this Pharisee’s spiritual problem is not that he’s a bad person. He was one of the good guys. His problem is that he was decent man who was completely dependent on his system of being good. He trusted in his tradition; he trusted in his institution; he trusted his heritage; he trusted his rules. In fact, he trusted tradition, institution, system, heritage, rules and himself so thoroughly that he had no need for the grace of God!

The tax collector, on the other hand, had no rules, no heritage, no system, no institution, and no tradition. In his spiritual nakedness, he had to trust in the only thing he could trust in... the grace of God.

This tax collector comes to God with the only virtue he has: the fact that he knows how much he needs God’s forgiveness. His only place to stand is in the mercy of God. This is not “aw, shucks” modesty. It’s not self-deprecation. This is, emblematically, that deep humility born in the awareness that nothing we do can ever earn us the love of God and nothing we ever do can deny us the love of God. Our best theology does not win us Divine favor. Our finely-wrought ethical systems do not earn us God. Our beloved institutions cannot contain God. Our heritage does not make us favorites in heaven. And most startlingly, our virtue does not make God love us either. Don’t misunderstand me: ethical systems matter, institutions matter, heritage matters, the choices we make matter, how we believe matters. All these things are good... They are all good until we start to fancy that they somehow make us special in the sight of God.

We all stand before God as equals. You might say that before God, every last one of us is just another tax collector or crack dealer. All of us loved, loved just the same, not because we are so good, not because of what we believe, not because of what institution we belong to, just loved, loved just the same, just because we are.
Oddly enough, people find this threatening. It’s threatening because it undercuts all the distinctions we make between different kinds of people. It’s threatening because it shatters our systems for classifying people. It’s threatening because it puts everybody in just one class of people, one people named “those whom God loves.”

Let me put flesh on the point with a couple of stories I love. First, a story about a modern tax-collector at prayer. My friend Jon Walton, presently minister of the First Presbyterian Church in New York City remembers a funeral he did out on Long Island. We were neighbors then too, he in Setauket as minister of Doug King’s home church, me in Northport. Jon’s tax-collector story goes like this: “It has been some years now since Doris died. When I visited her in her modest home….” Jon recalls, “she always baked cookies and heated tea in a whistling pot… She had delicate unmatched teacups from which we sipped as we sat at her dinning room table spread with the finest antique tablecloth she owned… Her son, Jim, was of a particular concern for her, a hard-living, hard-drinking, tough man who had spent some time in prison and wasn’t very good about staying in touch.”

“When Doris died, her daughter made the arrangements, a quiet service in the church, nothing showy, modest like Doris. But when the funeral came, her son and a dozen or so of his friends arrived on their… Harleys to do the honors for Jim’s mother. They gunned down Dyke Road, their two-wheelers rumbling… Into the church they came, boots, black leather jackets, bandanas, Budweiser t-shirts and all. The women that hung on the backs of the bikes came too, not quite dressed for church, but there, nonetheless…”

The dynamics under the old steeple were something to behold… Most of the bikers showed no signs of knowledge about church etiquette. The finer points of singing and standing were lost on them. “But,” Jon remembers, “out of the corner of my eye, every now and then, I caught Jim’s head bowed in prayer. Maybe he remembered confirmation class, sometime as a boy sitting next to his mother in church… I don’t know what he prayed,” Jon confesses, “… but my suspicion was that if any prayers were heard at Doris’ funeral, likely they were Jim’s, whatever they were.”
Second, a story about a latter day Pharisee, a model of virtue who knows it. This story is literary, from the great Southern short-story writer, Flannery O’Connor. In a tale she named “Revelation,” O’Connor wrote about a Mrs. Turpin, a woman who has neatly divided all the people of her little Southern town into classes of people. In the opening scene of the story, Mrs. Turpin is in her doctor’s waiting room. And as she waits, she assigns the people in the room into her complex system of classification. Blacks – some, not all – are at the bottom of her scheme; then, barely above, come white trash, then home-owners black and white, then home and land-owners like herself and her husband Claud, and then at the top, above herself, she places “fine” people with a lot of money.

Her system of classifying people is grossly offensive, of course. But the honest reader of the story will recognize that all of us operate with something like a Mrs. Turpin system. Ours are more subtle and politically correct, doubtless. But there is a shadow of Mrs. Turpin’s world of relative virtue in most all of us, and this is true in spades in New York City. We may barely know we’re doing it, but we place people a little more up or a little more down, a little more in or a little more out, even a bit closer to God or an inch farther away.

Mrs. Turpin’s revelation, the revelation that names the story, comes on the last page. Mrs. Turpin is angry. Somebody from a class of people a rung below her on the ladder has insulted her, and she is furious. She fumes indignantly while feeding her pigs. She protests aloud in words that echo the prayer of the Pharisee: “It’s no trash around here, black or white, that I haven’t given to. And break my back to the bone everyday working. And do for the church.”

Finally, her rage burns itself into a strange vision, a mystical revelation on the evening horizon. O’Connor describes it like this: “She saw the streak as a vast swinging bridge extending upward from the earth through a field of living fire. Upon it a vast horde of souls were rumbling toward heaven. There were whole companies of white trash, clean for the first time in their lives, and bands of (blacks) in white robes, and battalions of freaks and lunatics shouting and clapping and leaping like frogs. And bringing up the end of the procession was a tribe of people, who like herself and Claud, had always had a little of everything and the God-given wit to use it right… They were marching behind the others with great
dignity, accountable, as they had always been for good order and common sense and respectable behavior. They alone were on key. Yet she could see by their shocked and altered faces that even their virtues were being burned away.”

The grace of God is the great equalizer. For the fact is this: when you come into the presence of the One who is perfectly good, our relative mortal virtues and moral vices pale. The worst of us must lean on the grace of God, of course. But here the deeper truth: the best of us lean no less on the grace of God.

So the truth hidden in the story is this: do the right thing, of course; but don’t take your virtue too seriously. It was, I think, G.K. Chesterton who once quipped that angels can fly because they take themselves lightly.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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