

“Two Pockets”

Luke 18:9-14

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Emily M. Brown

A few days ago, heading to a party at Bailes’s work, I hailed a ride through one of those ride-sharing apps. We hit some traffic, and as we sat in the traffic jam, I started making conversation with the driver. Soon, he asked what I did for work; with some trepidation (because, depending on the person, it can get awkward very fast), I shared that I am a pastor. It wasn’t awkward, but it quickly became a very intense conversation.

Like so many people, he was someone who no longer goes to church, because he was discouraged by religious hypocrisy and infighting. He said that he had been raised Catholic, but that some members of his family were Christian. (That, incidentally, is a pet peeve of mine: Catholics are a type of Christian. When people refer to “Catholic” vs. “Christian,” they mean “Catholic” vs. “Protestant,” and we forget that there’s a third major branch of Christianity – the Eastern Orthodox church, like the Christianity practiced by our sextons Hanna and Roman.) In any case, he had become discouraged because he felt that too much of religious was all about money, and that religious institutions were full of phonies and hypocrites. He asked me if I had heard about some of the multimillionaire pastors with private jets, who preached constantly about the importance of donating money to the church to fund their luxurious lifestyles, and he told stories about priests who had taken vows of celibacy but secretly had affairs and illegitimate children. I commiserated with him, and tried to offer my perspective: that there are certainly plenty of religious leaders and entities who give Christianity a bad name, but there are also lots

of congregations like ours, the quieter, more unassuming ones, trying to follow Jesus. I told him that if he decided to give church another chance, I hoped he would find somewhere like that.

I was thinking about his words as I prepared for today's worship: it is Reformation Sunday, when we remember the Reformation that led to the divide between Protestantism and Catholicism, and as I studied the Bible story for today. Because I believe that Jesus shared this man's frustration with how religion so often and so easily turns toward hypocrisy and greed and self-congratulation.

Speaking to an unfriendly audience, Jesus tells them this parable: two men went to the temple to pray. One was a Pharisee. Now, the Pharisees and the early Christians were often at odds with each other, and so the Christian tradition has come to hear the word "Pharisee" as if it simply meant "bad guy" or "hypocrite." But the Pharisees were more than that. In a culture where religious observance was largely the purview of religious elites, the Pharisees advocated for more robust religious practice in the daily lives of everyday people. They wanted religion to be practiced by the people, not just seen to by the priests – a concern that they shared with the Protestant Reformers hundreds of years later. So a Pharisee went to the temple to pray, and he said, "God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income." Jesus' parable highlights the man's sense of superiority, the arrogance of his prayer. And yet, he does have reason to boast: he fasts twice a week and gives a tenth of his income, he says. That is to say, he is really making some serious sacrifices to put his religious commitment at the center of his life. One commentator I read observed that churches would be glad to have more members like this Pharisee – who pour their energy into their religious community and life of faith.

Meanwhile, the tax collector also prays. Tax collectors are another set of stock characters in scripture who are unfamiliar in our modern context (they're not at all like IRS agents), but unlike Pharisees, who get cast as bad guys because they were in a theological debate with the early Christians, tax collectors were universally despised in Jesus' context. They paid the Roman authorities a fixed amount for the privilege of extracting exorbitant taxes from Rome's colonial subjects by any means necessary. They collected as much money as they could bully and brutalize out of the people of their region, paid a set amount to Rome, and got to keep however much was left. They were collaborators with an oppressive imperial regime, their income was squeezed out of people who often were barely subsisting, and they were hated for it. But this tax collector goes to the temple to pray and, Jesus says, he "would not even look up to heaven" to pray; his posture is humble. He beats his breast and prays, "Lord, be merciful to me, a sinner." Jesus declares that the tax collector "went home justified," unlike the Pharisee. "All who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted," Jesus concludes.

As we remember the legacy of the reformers who challenged the Roman Catholic church and began the Protestant movement from which our church arises, the parable feels apt. The temptation would be to cast the Reformers and those who follow them as the tax collector, and the Catholic church they stood against as the Pharisee. Unlike the Pharisee, who believes he can earn his way into God's heart through fasting, prayer, and tithing, the theology of the Protestant Reformation places the emphasis on God's love and forgiveness. The emphasis is on God's faithfulness, not on human faithfulness. Reformed theology emphasizes that we are imperfect – that we are human, and we mess up and fall short. It teaches that our relationship with God is not predicated on our being good enough. God will always be reaching out to us, because God is loving and gracious and merciful. The temptation, then, is to say that our Protestant tradition

leads us to be like the tax collector, focused on God's mercy, rather than like the Pharisee, arrogantly and smugly congratulating himself for his good works.

But as I reflect on that conversation with the taxi driver, I am reminded that, when outsiders look at the church, they may see it a bit differently, and we should heed their observations. There is no religious sect or denomination that is exempt from the temptation to congratulate ourselves for doing it right, and look down our noses at the ones we think are doing it wrong. And there is no sect or denomination that is exempt from the baser human instincts – greed, and pride, like that driver mentioned, the smugness and arrogance that Jesus describes. One of the principles espoused in Reformed theology is the idea of “total human depravity,” which is a challenging one, and an idea that many of us would struggle with. We don't feel “totally depraved,” and we don't resonate with the implication that there is nothing good in us. But a colleague offered this explanation of his understanding of total depravity, which went something like this: there is nothing in me, he said, that cannot in some way take a dark turn. Nothing that I care about, or value, or love, is totally safe from being corrupted or misused. My love for family can turn to selfish disregard for neighbor. My love for God can turn to smugness and superiority. There is no part of me that I can rely on to be perfectly, uncorruptably good – and so, for perfect goodness, we have to turn not to ourselves, but to God.

“Those who exalt themselves will be humbled,” Jesus says, “and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”

And yet – although he speaks of the tax collector going home justified, I wonder whether there is something to be said for finding a balance between exalting oneself and humbling oneself. There is a time and a place for coming face to face with the ways that we have fallen short. There is a

time for standing in awe of the goodness of God in light of the myriad ways that we fail to live up to God's vision for us. There is a time and a place for sorrowing over the ways that we individually and humanity collectively have caused pain and grief in this world. But there is a time and place for lifting up our heads, leaving that time and place of sorrow and confession, and stepping out into the world to live faithfully.

Centuries ago, a great rabbi in the Jewish tradition named Simchah Bunam said something like this: every person needs to have two pockets. In one pocket should be the words, "anokhi afar va'efer," "I am dust and ashes." In the other pocket, "bishivli nivra ha'olam," "for my sake was the universe created." Wisdom, the rabbi said, is knowing when to draw on each pocket. Those who exalt themselves will be humbled: I am dust and ashes. Those who humble themselves will be exalted: for my sake the universe was created.

So when we find ourselves critiquing and nitpicking, when we find ourselves saying God I thank you that I'm not like the Catholics or the Fundamentalists or the Spiritual-but-not-Religious, God I thank you that I'm not like the people who spend Sunday morning at soccer practice or at brunch or in bed, let us remember this parable and reach into one pocket: I am dust and ashes. But when we feel guilty and weighed down, when we cannot even look at heaven, when we feel small and sad, there is a second pocket: for my sake the universe was created. May we find that balance, that third way, that freedom of being filled neither with superiority nor with shame, but with gratitude and awe for the vast love of God, which is for tax collectors and Pharisees, for Catholics and Protestants, for soccer moms and brunch-goers, for the spiritual-but-not-religious, for the poor and the wealthy, and for us. The love that invites us to turn to God with thanksgiving, set down our burdens, and take hands with one another, united by God's grace.

Amen.