

Sermon: Surprising Exaltation out of Humility

Year C, Proper 25

[Joel 2:23-32; Psalm 65; 2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18; Luke 18:9-14](#)

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It is sometimes hard for us New Englanders to really connect with the relationship the ancient Israelites had with water. They farmed in a semi-arid zone, surrounded by deserts on one side and the Mediterranean on the other. We have water year round, often frozen, but it's there. Our aquifers run deep and are regularly replenished. But after this summer, when our wells are drying out and folks are beginning to go to the Laundromat, just in case this load of wash is the one that pushes the well beyond what we can manage, we're beginning to get a sense of how much God's abundance shows up in the images of the water.

When you are thirsty, and your children are thirsty, and your cattle, when you have to walk on dry lake bed from the dock where you usually tied your boat up, water can no longer be taken for granted. Your sense that God created the world is renewed every time it rains, even just a little bit, because you see Creation being renewed with your own eyes. Water is part of the conversation you have with God. The arrival of water, especially when everything had been so dry, brings God's abundance bursting out into the open. No wonder the ancient psalmist said to God:

the river of God is full of water; you provide the people with grain, for so you have prepared it. You water its furrows abundantly, settling its ridges, softening it with showers, and blessing its growth. You crown the year with your bounty; your wagon tracks overflow with richness. The pastures of the wilderness overflow, the hills gird themselves with joy, the meadows clothe themselves with flocks, the valleys deck themselves with grain, they shout and sing together for joy. (Psalm 65:9-13)

The wagon tracks overflow with richness. The harvest is so great it's falling out of the cart on the way home. And it's not the people's harvest. It's God's harvest and God's wagon tracks. God gives us a world where such abundance happens. That's just love.

In the parable from Luke, we see two men praying at the Temple. The Pharisee starts out by saying he's grateful to God, but he goes on at such length about what's he's done, that you begin to suspect that God should be grateful God has such a world class follower. Clearly he was better than whole classes of people, like thieves, rogues, adulterers and tax collectors (Luke 18:11). More than that, Jews were only required to fast on the great holiday of Yom Kippur, but some had taken to fasting twice a week on Mondays and Thursday, not coincidentally the market days in Jerusalem when the country farmers would come into the city to sell their produce.¹ If you wanted to be sure everyone saw you fasting, you'd do it on the days when there were more people around. Jewish law and custom expected people to tithe, basically giving 10% to the Temple. But the norm was to tithe based on what they themselves had produced.² The Pharisee is pointing out that he is tithing on things he bought in the market place, so

¹ William Barclay, *The Gospel of Luke*. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1975:223-224.

² Barclay, 223-224.

his income is taking a bigger hit. And, if you think about it for a minute, he's also saying his income is big enough to take that hit.

The tax collector, on the other hand, is humble. His head is bowed, he beats his breast like someone in mourning. He's not making excuses. He's a sinner and he says so, straight out. He doesn't only mean it like when we say we're all sinners. The Roman Empire basically franchised out tax collection; people would bid on it because it was such a lucrative gig. The Roman provinces would be told how much they had to send back to Rome and contracts to collect the money would be handed out, usually based on kickbacks and bribes. Because the deal was you could make the rules. Anything above and beyond what you collected was yours to keep. So rich people, usually Roman citizens, would get the contracts and they would hire people to collect the money and those people would hire people to collect the money. It was a highly functioning pyramid of graft and corruption, with the folks who did the dirty work being locals, who took the job because it was a living. But it meant they would be outcasts in their community. So when the tax collector prays, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner." (Luke 18:13), God may be the only thing in the world that will show the tax collector mercy.

Jesus tells his listeners that the tax collector went home justified, meaning accepted by God's grace.³ Talk about the abundance of God's love. Wagon tracks overflowing with richness. (Psalm 65:11) It's laid out in very stark terms here.

At least that's how we usually hear this story. And it's not wrong. But it's worth noting that this kind of clear So-and-So Good while This-and-Such Bad is not the way Jesus usually teaches. Jesus uses parables in a very particular way. When Jesus tells a parable, we take one step in a familiar place with familiar people, then another, then another, and then Jesus points out something completely unfamiliar and completely shocking. The usual interpretation of this story never has that unfamiliar shocking moment where we learn. Where did that moment go?

If we look at the tax collector, there are some factors that we miss because we're 2,000 years removed from the context in which it was first told. In our society we don't have people that are in the same role as tax collectors. They were collaborators with an occupying power. They provided the lifeblood, the actual cash, that allowed Rome to pay the troops that keep the Jewish state in submission. The taxes imposed on top of the tithes owed to the Temple were often impossible to meet, so most farmers ended up paying their taxes and not supporting the Temple, even if that meant they were no longer members in good standing in their community. The tax collectors were members of the public, they had legitimate jobs. But they were despised.

So if you want someone listening to your story to see themselves in a character, to recognize admirable behavior, you don't make that character a tax collector.⁴ No one would be willing to step into those shoes.

And if somehow you could get past that hurdle, let's look at what the tax collector did. He stood apart from others, beat his breast and lowered his head while praying a simple prayer, "God, be merciful to

³ George Arthur Buttrick, "The Gospel According to St. Luke: Exposition Chs. 13-18," in vol. 8 of *The Interpreter's Bible: The Holy Bible in the King James and Revised Standard Versions with General Articles and Introduction, Exegesis, Exposition for Each Book of the Bible*, ed. George Arthur Buttrick, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1955), 309.

⁴ Timothy A. Friedrichsen, "The Temple, a Pharisee, a Tax Collector, and the Kingdom of God: Rereading a Jesus Parable (Luke 18:10-14a)." *Journal of Biblical Literature* 124, no. 1 (2005): 91-92.

me, a sinner!” Where are the reparations?⁵ Where’s the action that comes from the acknowledgment and acceptance of the sin? We are all sinners but that doesn’t mean that we can’t take action to get into right relationship with God and with our community. Is it humble to think you don’t have to make things right or is there a hint of exaltation, that something like that can’t be expect of you?⁶

Now look at the Pharisee. We know that Pharisees were opposed to Jesus; that comes through loud and clear. But we need to remember why. Pharisees believed that the country was degenerating because the people had stopped supporting traditional values. The Pharisees wanted to make the laws of Moses, not just the Big 10, but all of them, more accessible to all the people in their everyday lives. They didn’t want the community to outsource their relationship with God to the priests. They felt Jesus was going too far, especially because who he hung out with and who he ate with, including the tax collectors, was taking his followers further and further from the traditional values that had made the community strong.

We’re still having that discussion today and it’s not a clear call about how we get on the right track. Some of the old ways made us stronger as a community.

Given that, let’s look at what the Pharisee did. He gave thanks to God for having a good life. He essentially said, “There but for the grace of God go I.”⁷ Shouldn’t we express our thanks for what we have been given, especially when we’ve been dealt a good hand? By and large, the Pharisees came from the vanishingly small middle class that existed in a period with extremes of wealth and poverty.⁸ They had the means to tithe more than others and some of them did because they knew that many of the poor could not. So they gave more because they had more. Some fasted more often than was called for in hope of atoning for some of the sins of the community.⁹

In the liturgy of the day, in the rituals in the Temple, one prayed out loud. Anonymous offerings were not accepted at the Temple.¹⁰ So if you were giving a gift to the Temple, you had to say so in the presence of other members of the community. You could certainly argue that the Pharisee was going through the motions without bringing his whole heart and soul to them. But if he was following the rituals, perhaps there is more humility and less exaltation than first appeared.

So if the Pharisee can be exalted or humble and the tax collector can be humble or exalted, then what are we to make of this parable? Jesus says that the tax collector is justified, accepted by God’s grace, for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted. (Luke 18:14). If both the Pharisee and the tax collector are familiar, or at least familiar enough that we can see ourselves in them, then where is the shocking, surprising moment that comes so often in these stories from Jesus?

⁵ Friedrichsen, 115.

⁶ Fredrick Carlson Holmgren, "The Pharisee and the Tax Collector: Luke 18:9-14 and Deuteronomy 26:1-15." *Interpretation* 48, no. 3 (1994): 259.

⁷ Friedrichsen, 94.

⁸ Friedrichsen, 107.

⁹ Friedrichsen, 111.

¹⁰ Holmgren, 258.

Does that moment come if we realize that perhaps God doesn't follow our human sized rules?¹¹ Why is the tax collector justified? God knows. And that is enough. God's abundance is there, the wagon tracks overflowing with richness. (Psalm 65:11) But there isn't a set of rules, do X not Y, always be sure to do M but not N, that can guarantee the outcome we want.

Think back to the Psalm. There were so many lovely images of God's abundance, of flowing water when and where it was needed. Step back through the images of God's power and might. Step back towards the beginning of the Psalm. *We shall be satisfied with the goodness of your house, your holy temple.* (Psalm 65:4). Why are we in God's house? *Happy are those whom you choose and bring near to live in your courts* (Psalm 65:4).¹² We are with God because God invited us there. Who are we that God invited? *When degrees of iniquity overwhelm us, you choose to forgive our transgressions.* (Psalm 65:2). We are sinners and God chooses to forgive us. We don't know why. We *can't* know why. But we can be shocked and humbled and exalted that we live in a world where that is so. We can *have faith* that we live in a world where that is so. Because how abundant is the love that brought this world into being? That the rains come at all is amazing. That we are forgiven simply by asking to be forgiven is shocking. That all we have to do is live a humble life worthy of being so exalted is surprising.

So, yes, let's bow our heads and offer a prayer of confession.

PRAYER OF CONFESSION

Leader: Even before we admit our sin, God promises to hear us with mercy. Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.

All: No words can express the depth of our need or reveal the extent of our sin. But you know us completely, O God. When deeds of iniquity overwhelm us, you forgive our transgressions. You rescue us from evil and clothe us with love. Humbly, we thank you; for no words can express our gratitude for the gift of your salvation. But for you grace we would have no hope for this world or the next. Amen.

Leader: Sisters and brothers, the news is so good we can scarcely believe it: God does not hold our sin against us but pours out abundant grace. Give thanks to God and by the Spirit's power share the gospel far and near: In Jesus Christ we are forgiven!

¹¹ Friedrichsen, 118.

¹² D. Cameron Murchison, "Proper 25, Theological Perspective, Psalm 65" in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year C, Volume 4*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, [Louisville, KY:Westminster John Knox Press, 2010], 200.