

A friend of mine once said that some clergy could benefit from taking a class in humility. I genuinely think that humility is important for everyone, lay and ordained, but I couldn't let a setup like that pass by. So instead I said, "Take a class? I could teach the class! I could teach it better than anyone else possibly could." And fortunately my friend took it as the joke it was. If he'd taken it the wrong way, we might not have been friends anymore.

We might be taking this parable the wrong way. This parable is indeed about humility, among other things, but not necessarily in the way we think. As always, background and context are essential to a sound understanding. I was surprised to learn that prayers like that of Pharisee in the parable were actually prayed by ancient Jews, and "while those prayers... sound pretentious and self-righteous [to us], they were actually intended to give God the credit for any righteousness that the pray-er might claim. Think of the saying, 'But for the grace of God, there go I.' "*"

We tend to assume Pharisees are the bad guys, and there are moments when Jesus unquestionably subjects them to sharp criticism, but they were not a monolithic group, and they had a positive reputation amongst the public. Not only does the Pharisee in the parable possibly give God the credit for his righteousness, a very humble attitude, he also mentions spiritual and material good works that meet or exceed the requirements of the Law and public expectations. Tax collectors, on the other hand, we don't have to make assumptions about. They were bad guys. A far cry from IRS agents enforcing our government's tax laws, the tax collectors of Jesus's day were traitors, collaborators with an occupying foreign power who brutally shook down their countrymen for personal gain.

Making matters more complex, remember that while individuals were responsible for their own behavior, sin and righteousness were understood to be collective. That's why the Lord's Prayer is phrased in the plural, "forgive *us our* trespasses, as *we* forgive *those* who trespass against *us*." So while Jesus somewhat oddly mentions both the Pharisee "standing by himself" and the tax collector "standing far off," spiritually, they are connected, and this is highlighted by their both being at the Temple. The phrasing of the Greek makes it possible that the tax collector offers his prayer in response to the Pharisee's. It's possible that the point of the parable is that both the Pharisee and the tax collector demonstrate humility in ways that are authentic to them. More than that, it's possible that Jesus's audience would have understood that the tax collector's justification is aided by the Pharisee's surplus of good works. That would have been a shocking twist ending, and yet it points toward Jesus reconciling all humanity to God through his death on the cross.

If you were paying close attention to the Gospel, you might think you've caught me in a mistake. How on earth could I say that both the Pharisee and the tax collector were justified when Jesus said, "this man went down to his home justified rather than the other"? Well, it turns out that the Greek word translated "rather than" could also be

translated “alongside”: “This man went down to his home justified alongside the other.” And that sounds like the Gospel to me, for it is a more gracious image than the one that naturally came to mind. Sirach was correct that God “will listen to the prayer of one who is wronged.” But Jesus reminds us that God will also listen to the prayer of the one who did the wrong.

While we might appreciate complex stories with morally ambiguous main characters, we are much more readily engaged by stories with clear-cut heroes and villains. But, between our prejudices and those of the translators, we are likely to assume this parable is the latter. Something about human nature, perhaps our deep-seated insecurities, drives a need for us to put ourselves in the hero’s role and to have, or construct, a villain. This parable is, among other things, a trap that exposes that way of thinking. Even if the conventional reading is correct and the Pharisee is offered as an example of how not to think, if we come away thinking the pharisee is an irredeemable villain, and thanking God that we are not like him... we have made ourselves the villain.

So I prefer to read this parable as a story of God’s overwhelming and all-inclusive grace, and a story that encourages me to pursue grace in my own life. Like any story of grace worth hearing, it points out real problems to which grace is the essential response. We might tend to follow the easy reading and divide the world into good guys and bad guys, but the truth is, all of us are capable of sin and grace, in word, deed, and sentiment. Only God is all good, all the time, and God’s goodness, God’s grace, is enough for us; God forgives us all our sins, great and small, known and unknown, thanks be to God. By God’s grace, we are justified, restored to a right relationship with God.

In his weekly audio address, our bishop emphasized that God’s grace is freely given, without any requirements. All we have to do is reach out and take it. But that requires humility, because it requires acknowledging at least implicitly that we need God’s grace. And so the bishop added, “Maybe being able to reach out and take it is a gift, too.” I think it is, which means that as hard as it is, we should offer some grace to those who seem to be lacking, and refrain from judgment. If God can justify a tax collector, we can show a bit of grace to the far less wicked characters we encounter.

The question therefore is not, What do I need to do to get in good with God? God already loves us far more than we could expect, hope, or imagine. Rather, the question is, What do I do now? How do I live my life in response to this incredible grace? The answer, of course, is to be as gracious as we can be. Individual acts of grace are always a way we can glorify God. And once a year, we have the chance to coordinate our desire to offer grace collectively, as one body. Our stewardship drive offers us a golden opportunity to express our grace, since we know that the money we give will support mission and ministries that express even more grace.

This year, the need is especially great. In past years, the church could count on

balancing its budget with a surplus from the school. And while in principle there's nothing wrong, and much right, with the school and the church helping each other out, in recent years, the school's surplus was largely due to shamefully and appallingly underpaying our teachers, in blatant contradiction of the Bible's many demands for fair wages and labor practices. For years this community took unfair advantage of our teachers' loyalty to the school and each other, and their love of the children, albeit unknowingly. Well, now that we know, That. Is. Over. We are giving the teachers raises, not to an extravagant level, but merely to a level we can honestly consider fair. This is not a matter of debate; it has been announced, and it is happening. For a community that holds itself out as the people of God, economic justice is not optional.

While the school will continue to contribute heavily to the church budget in the form of staff and maintenance cost sharing, that was already factored in. We have to make up for the lost surplus through pledging. And, with great thanks to both God and our members, the preliminary results are encouraging. While only a small fraction of our membership has returned their pledge cards so far, almost all of them have significantly increased their pledges, and that fraction includes a first-time pledge. Thank you! That is amazing.

If you aren't already pledging, please, make this the year you start. I know that it's normal to be apprehensive about starting to pledge, but most people here have been pledging for years, and we seem to be doing fine, don't we? Start at a level you're comfortable with and you'll be fine too. And if you are pledging already, first of all, thank you. Secondly, if you aren't already tithing, this needs to be the year that you make real progress toward that goal. If you're giving 3% of your income, you can do 5%. If you're giving 5%, you can do 7%. And so forth. If we as a congregation respond to God's generosity with our own, we won't have to sacrifice anything we've come to expect our church to be or to do. I have to believe that we as a congregation are willing to pay our own way, rather than balance our budget on the backs of dedicated, good-hearted people.

We aren't pharisees or tax collectors. We aren't thieves, rogues, or adulterers. We are God's beloved children, humbly redeemed and sustained by God's grace. God will hear our prayers, and respond, better than anyone else possibly could. God will stand by us and give us strength to face any challenge, that God's grace might be fully proclaimed in this place. To him be the glory forever and ever. Amen.

*<https://leftbehindandlovingit.blogspot.com/2013/10/prayer-as-tool-for-self-righteousness.html>