

of grace. What sent him home justified was his simple acknowledgement that all sinners, especially him, depend on God's mercy. Pharisee or Tax Collector, faithful elder or occasional church-goer, person living the good life or person picking up the pieces—all of us rely on God's grace and mercy. And we go home blessed when we know and acknowledge that truth.

So obviously, we shouldn't emulate the Tax Collector's way of life, but perhaps we learn something from the orientation of his spirit. From his request for God's mercy. From his honesty about his life—that it was broken, as all of ours are in some way. And from those things alone being the content of his prayer. "Share your grace and mercy with me, God. I need your help." Full stop. No bragging about how hard we're trying. No comparing ourselves to others. No assumptions that our way is right or our view of the world is complete. Only trusting in God's freely given grace and love.

I struggle a bit with the end of the storybook. Tyler finds a new friend, named Niko, who is encouraging and supportive when they play Frisbee and guitars. Niko is not a Pufferfish, but maybe someone who likes to swim as part of a school of fish, protecting and supporting all those around him. That's good news for Niko and Tyler. But the book doesn't say what happened to Jake. From what we read, the division he created stands, and he may be left with no friends at all. My heart hurts thinking about that. Jesus ends the parable saying, "all who exalt themselves will be humbled. And all who humble themselves will be exalted." Maybe Tyler's new friendship with Niko humbled Jake. Maybe he realized his Pufferfish tendencies had left him all alone. Maybe once he realized that, he started to celebrate the success of the kids around him and the joy of being together. So rather than contempt and division, eventually he enjoyed friendship and companions. I hope so. Jesus' words imply that the exalting and humbling may be a continuous cycle, not a once and for all event. We realize our need for humility and do it well for a while. Until we look up and realize we've been acting a little too exalted; a lot like the Pharisee. And so, we're humbled again. The life of faith doesn't lead us toward constant improvement. It leads us, again and again, to remember our ultimate reliance on God's grace.

All glory and honor, thanks and praise be to God. Amen.



October 23, 2022

Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost

"A Sneaky Parable"

Rev. Emma Nickel

Scripture: Luke 18:8-14

This is a sneaky little parable. It is about humility; trusting in God and not so much in ourselves. I think that much is clear. But it gets sneaky because it can make us congratulate ourselves for being humble about our faithfulness. Which is obviously the opposite of humility. And that puts us right back where we started.

The parable snuck up on me just like that this week, even while I was right in the middle of working on this sermon. It took a few hours after the incident for me to realize what had happened. See, next Sunday, we're having a special Reformation Sunday service focusing on the statements of faith, called confessions, that have shaped Presbyterian history. Some thirty or forty years ago, a set of banners was designed, one representing each confession of the church. We don't have a set, but many congregations made them and they're still hanging around in a closet somewhere. If ever there was an opportunity to highlight those banners here, it felt like next week was it. So I first emailed, and then followed up with a phone call to a local congregation asking if we could borrow their set of banners. When the Administrative Assistant picked up the phone, I could hear the hesitation in her voice. She said they had gotten my request, but they had never done anything like that before—let another church borrow the banners. And they were still in discussions about whether they could do it. She just didn't know when they would come to a decision. I hung up in frustration and a little disbelief.

So I got on my high horse. I was fuming around the office, asking "can you believe that?! No wonder people aren't coming to church like they used to when churches can't even share with each other. Thank goodness *my* church isn't like *that* one!"

Boom. There I was. The Pharisee. Thanking God that *I* was good and righteous. Thanking God that *my church* isn't like those *other* churches. I've repented for my feelings. And I'm still super glad to be *your* pastor and to work *here*. But whether our church is or isn't like other churches is not the point. The parable is concerned with the importance of humility, no matter who we are, since we all rely on God's grace.

1 Nadia Bolz-Weber, "You can take the girl out of fundamentalism, but..." October 17, 2022, The Corners,

<https://thecorners.substack.com/p/you-can-take-the-girl-out-of-fundamentalism>

2 Trudy Ludwig, *Better Than You*, illustrated by Adam Gustavson (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2011).

3 Justo L. Gonzalez, *Luke*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2010), 213.

I've thought a lot about humility in the last few years. Which must be because that trait feels like it's in short supply these days. There is no room left for humility when we are all so certain that we are right. And I think most of us are pretty sure of that, like I was this week. Our assurance that our ways are right is on little stuff: like whether pineapple belongs on pizza; which way the toilet paper should hang; whether to use a real or artificial Christmas tree. As well as on bigger stuff like politics and parenting. We trust in ourselves, that we are right in our beliefs and our actions. Which, in effect, implies that everyone else is getting it wrong.

Nadia Bolz-Weber is an ordained Lutheran pastor who is also a bestselling author. She wrote this week in her newsletter, called the Corners, about her growing up years in a fundamentalist church. That experience was quite hurtful and taught her lots of things about women, sexuality, and God that she's had to unlearn. So by age 17, Bolz-Weber escaped those fundamentalist beliefs. She got involved with battles for land rights, freedom for Cuba, all kinds of activism. She finally felt like she was involved in causes that mattered to her. She writes of that time, "The causes were righteous, I feel no differently about that now. But the unwavering level of devotion and commitment I demanded from myself and others, the being so sure about who was right and who was wrong, who was good and who was bad—well, decades later I see how much it smacked of the same kind of arrogance and dualism I was trying hard to leave behind."¹

The Pharisee prayed, "God, I thank you that I am not like other people." He named off a list of people he was glad not to be and he pointed a rhetorical finger right at the Tax Collector, praying off in the corner. He was filled with strident self-assurance and he lacked even an ounce of humility.

Our culture now uses the word "Pharisee" to point to this kind of behavior, so much that it's become kind of a caricature. So who were Pharisees really? They were Jewish people who were highly respectable, who practiced holiness in an exacting way, the way they saw God describe in the Torah, or the first five books of our Bible. The word "Pharisee" means 'separated one,' so many of their behavior separated them or set them apart from others so that they remained holy. It's easy for us to dismiss their habits as strange or too strident, but they were just trying to live in God's way the best way they knew how. This Pharisee in the story was doing a particularly good job of following God's instructions in the scriptures, the Torah. He was, in fact, going above and beyond the call. He was tithing on *all* his income, not just some of it; he was giving more than was required. He was fasting more often than the law advised. By all accounts he really was living a good and faithful life.

Then there was the Tax Collector. He was, by all accounts, not living a very faithful life. He worked on behalf of the state, collecting taxes. But always collecting more than what was required to line his own pockets. He was, as he said, a sinner.

Both men were praying in the Temple—a normal place for a Pharisee and a very unlikely place for a Tax Collector to be. Both were clearly trying to draw closer to God through their prayers in that place. But the Pharisee was seeking God by lifting himself up and pushing others away. The Pharisee's self-centeredness and his insistence on being right broke down relationships; it didn't build them. The way to draw closer to God is to live out love and humility that unites us and draws us together. We are not meant to be more and more divided.

In the story we read with the kids, we see how self-centeredness pushes others away. The little boy Tyler, reflects on his neighbor Jake, who seems to be making his life miserable. Jake is good at basketball and math, and his family must have money to buy him nice things that he gets to enjoy. The problem is that he uses his skills and gifts against his Tyler. All his bragging means he treats Tyler with contempt and makes him feel small. Tyler's Uncle Kevin describes the problem saying Jake is acting like a Pufferfish when he boasts so much. His behavior puffs him up and makes him feel good about himself. But the result is that "Jake takes up so much space that he can also push away friends."² Division instead of togetherness.

That's what Bolz-Weber realized, too. She had tried to distance herself from the ugly bits of fundamentalism—the exclusion, the moral superiority—by becoming an activist seeking to do good in the world. But even so-called *good* actions and behavior get twisted when you are convinced you have a corner on the truth. Her activism and politics—right, though she still thinks they were—functioned in just the same way as her fundamentalist church. Both movements believed they were totally right in all things and viewed all others as morally bankrupt. This Pufferfish way of life can feel really good, when we are so certain we are living right, doing right, being faithful. Until we realize that it's plagued by arrogance; and it divides us from others, maybe even from God.

Justo Gonzalez in his commentary on Luke makes the trap of this parable clear. He writes, "There is a story about a Sunday school teacher who, after a great lesson on the parable of the Pharisee and the Publican, led his class in prayer: 'Lord, we thank you that we have you word and your church, and that therefore we are not like the Pharisee...' The contradiction between what the parable says and what this teacher did is obvious. But we fail to see that in the very act of pointing to that contradiction, and perhaps even chuckling at this teacher's incomprehension, we are secretly saying, 'Lord, I thank you that I am not like this teacher who did not even understand your parable...!'"³

Yikes! A sneaky parable, indeed. What are we to take away from the story then? Well, Jesus says the Tax Collector in this story went home justified. In theology, justification refers to God's gracious acceptance of sinners not on their own account, but solely because of God's grace. Our faith almost always circles back to God's grace. The Tax Collector certainly didn't earn that blessing