

Sirach 35: 8-16
Joel 2: 23-29.
Luke: 18: 9-17

Navigating Trust, Pride, and Shame
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Many of you are aware of the Jewish celebrations of *Rosh Hoshana*, the New Year, and *Yom Kippur*, the Day of Atonement. This year, *Yom Kippur* was on October 12. Then there is the celebration of *Sukkot*, the Festival of Booths, a week-long harvest celebration which ends this evening. Tomorrow evening through Tuesday evening is the culmination of the Jewish High Holy Days season, a less familiar holiday to many of us: *Simchat Torah*. This celebrates the gift of the Torah, the first five books of Hebrew Scripture, to God's people. On that day the annual cycle of readings is completed and begun again with the last bit of Deuteronomy and the first bit of Genesis. So joyful are the worshippers on that day that they remove the Torah scrolls from the ark and dance with them around the synagogue. The circle of readings is complete, but they rejoice that they can begin again, returning to the source of meaning and blessing and survival. It is a dynamic dance of learning and growth, always looking for new insights and new ways to engage the world. A Hasidic saying goes: "On *Simchat Torah*, we rejoice in the Torah, and the Torah rejoices in us; the Torah, too, wants to dance, so we become the Torah's dancing feet."

We might well envy this attitude of joy, this embrace of wisdom, that is embodied by these celebrations. Rarely have I seen this kind of enthusiasm in our congregation: I have yet to see anyone dancing around the sanctuary with the old Bible from our communion table in their arms. No, rather than a dance, when we think of Scripture and engage with our holy texts, I think it is a... *navigation* of sorts. We are a little more tentative in our embrace of the Bible, for the most part. There are parts we never read, and may never want to read. There are multiple and confusing depictions of God. There are rules and instructions that we cannot bring ourselves to follow, and there are others that seem unattainable. So we – and I, as I write sermons – *navigate* the tricky waters of Scripture, avoiding the shoals of literalism and the rip tides of narrow self-interest and trying to flow with a current of – wisdom, or maybe even transformation. How's that for an extended metaphor? It's almost biblical ☺

Today, just to complicate things, I included an unusual reading. The Book of Sirach is one of the books of the *apocrypha*, found in Catholic Bibles but not in Protestant ones. It was written in Greek about 200 years before the time of Christ and, though it reflects Jewish thought of that time, was never accepted in the canon of the Jewish Bible. We read it from time to time, and can find it edifying. So we might think of it as a supplement to our understanding of the New Testament, a sort of bridge from ancient Judaism to the early church.

The writer of the Book of Sirach stresses the importance of attitude in offering and worship, and in everyday life. We read about glorifying the Lord generously, about the cheerful face of the giver, and about dedicating with gladness. We also read that kindness and almsgiving to those in need is like a religious sacrifice in bringing us close to God. So many things will bring us close to God, when we lift them up with open hands and open hearts. All of these things open us not only to God's grace, but to our neighbor's good will as well. Prayer, justice and compassion are closely

intertwined. All of this is pretty straightforward – not necessarily easy to live out, but we get it. For those who think wealth and status are everything, this passage is a corrective.

When Jesus told the story in parable, 200 years later, about the two men who go up to the Temple in Jerusalem to pray, he is also concerned less with the details of their prayer and more with their attitude. The Pharisee, by the way, was a very good man: religiously observant and generous to the poor. There is nothing wrong with his way of life. But he can't quite resist looking over at the tax collector and making comparisons. He is contemptuous, and this colors his entire prayer. Ostensibly, it is a prayer of thanksgiving – but it is a very proud sort of thanksgiving: "Thank you God, that I am so perfect." Instead of emptying himself, he is inflating his own self-esteem at the expense of another.

Today, when I read this parable in the Gospel of Luke, I find the navigation metaphor – remember the navigation metaphor? - apt. Somehow we are supposed to find in our Scripture the sweet spot between self-confidence and pride, between repentance and self-loathing. We are supposed to come before God both full of gratitude and empty enough to receive. If we can get ourselves to that place of balance, we might be led into the mystery of transformation.

In that work of navigation, it seems that it is dangerous to compare our relative goodness, real or imagined, with that of our neighbors. This is because this approach creates a barrier between us and God. Even more destructive is its use of religion as the divisive element between us and our sisters and brothers. This kind of religiosity separates rather than unifies the human family.

But remember, the tax collector's abject humility was not a virtue that earns him God's love and acceptance either. I like to think of that humility as a posture of openness in which he is able to receive something from God. Ultimately, the Pharisee and the tax collector are the same. They both need God's love. The difference is that the Pharisee doesn't know it and the tax collector does. The tax collector goes up to the temple with not much to offer. His hands and his heart are empty and vulnerable, and he knows it, and therefore he has room to experience grace.

One biblical scholar, Charles Cousar writes, "Prayer is the occasion for honesty about oneself and generosity about others." That seems directed right at the man who was so grateful about his own virtues that he could only be contemptuous of others.

We shouldn't get into a simplistic reading of this parable: the Pharisee was bad because he was proud; the tax collector was good because his prayer was so abjectly humble. That can get us into trouble, since we can use even that "Be merciful to me, a sinner" as an unfair and unrealistic point of comparison as well. There is a wonderful old story from the Jewish tradition that illustrates this danger:

A rabbi decides to model repentance for his congregation. Humbly he beseeches the Almighty for forgiveness, and he beats his breast proclaiming, "Before You, God, I am nothing. I am nothing."

The cantor sees him and joins in: "I am nothing. I am nothing," she cries.

The temple president, sensing that he too must get in on the act, now comes up. "I am nothing. I am nothing," he sobs.

In the silence that follows, the rabbi turns to the cantor and whispers, "Look who thinks he's nothing."

Even though our texts today seem to be all about prayer, they have a message for our lives out in the world. Recently I was speaking with some people about the shame and guilt some people feel for the sins of their families or their ancestors. Some Germans who were children during World War II were completely innocent themselves, but still have a sense of responsibility for their parents' participation or apathy in the Third Reich. And this can be a crippling burden – I think of it as challenging Jesus' words about the little children who come so sweetly to the Kingdom of God. We tend to be less self-critical, perhaps that those Germans, those *kriegskinder*, about the fact that some of our ancestors participated in the genocide of the original American tribes, or in the institution of slavery. But if our faith teaches anything, it is that we can bring these things to our God, using prayer as an “occasion for honesty” as Cousar says, dispensing with both pride and shame. We do this because we want the insight that allows us to move forward to correct the evils of the past, whether we, or our parents, were personally responsible or not. We want that insight, wisdom and grace that can only be attained with an open and questing heart.

I think of the many ways we pray – or speak or think or act – in some kind of equivalent of those words: “God, I thank you that I am not like other those people. Really, thank you, God.” Perhaps this feels most apparent in an election season, which call us to judge and choose as part of our civic responsibility. But how easy it is – and I admit this about myself – to move from careful consideration of the issues at hand to a blanket condemnation of others or mean-spirited “us and them” mockery. How will we navigate our way out of this season to some kind of fruitful cooperation in the months ahead? Now, more than any other time, we need the ego-deflating occasion of honesty and generosity that we might find in prayer, and a life lived out of that prayer.

I want to think the tax collector left the temple not only justified, but resolved to live differently. To imagine how he might make a life that was just and fair and good, rather than continuing in the life that hurt himself and others. When it says he went away justified, it could mean that he went away ready: ready to see where God was going to lead him next.

I want to think both men eventually learned that God is life-giving, and much more generous than we can imagine. Maybe the next time the Pharisee went to pray, he would offer up his empty hands, looking for fulfillment. Then both men, and all the listeners, could go out into the world to love and serve our neighbors, unencumbered with either arrogance or shame. Amen.