

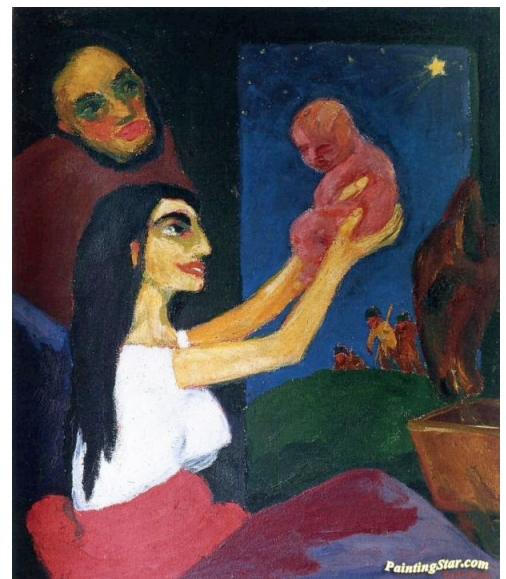
Despicable me

Luke 18:9-14

October 23, 2016



This painting was done by Domenico Ghirlandaio in the late fifteenth century. It is one of three paintings I have used in confirmation classes as visual aids for a discussion about the meaning of Jesus' incarnation. The other two are shown below:



These are three very different paintings, all of which I like, for different reasons. The first painting is entitled, "Adoration of the Shepherds." The artist, Ghirlandaio, put himself in the painting. He is one of the shepherds, the one in the brown robe pointing toward the child.

What do you see in the painting? Notice the details: books, a bird, pieces of luggage, the parade of people in the background, the sarcophagus in the foreground, grazing sheep on the hillside, an angel in the sky, a town, mountains, a river, the sea.

There is great detail in this painting and great depth, depth both of space and of time. Ghirlandaio has not set the birth of Jesus in first century Palestine, but in fifteenth century Italy! The artist sets the event in a wider context, underlining the global significance of the birth of this child for people everywhere and of every age.

But I also like the painting because it reminds us of the broader context of every event, every moment. Consider all of us gathered in this sanctuary, right here, right now. There is so much else going on, all around us! Others are gathered for worship across the street in the sanctuary of Trinity Lutheran Church and down the street at Christian Fellowship Missionary Baptist Church and at St. Martin de Tours Episcopal Church in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, where I once preached a sermon, in French.

A farmer is sitting in a combine in Creston trying to get in the last of the corn and a vintner in Alsace is inspecting his grapes as he prepares to complete the harvest.

A woman is cowering with her children in her home in Aleppo praying that the bombs will not hit them and another woman is watching her children as they sleep in a tent in a refugee camp in Jordan praying that news will come that they have a place to go.

A man is kneeling at the side of a bed, holding the hand of his dying father, and not far away, in the same hospital, another man is standing beaming as his wife cradles their newborn daughter.

There is so much else going on, right now, all around us. "Well, of course," you are thinking. "That's obvious."

And yet, at this moment, at any moment, are you conscious of everything else? Of everybody else? Do we remember that it is not all about us, that we are not at the center of this universe, that we are but one tiny speck in one brief moment of time, one little part -- a part, yes -- but one little part of the vast continuum of space and time and history? Do we remember that we matter, yes, but that there is much, so much, and many, so many, that matter, too?

What is the name given to the attribute of human character that understands place, that is able to put things into proper perspective, that knows and acknowledges the relationship of the parts, especially its own small part, to the whole? Humility.

Jesus' parable is about humility.

Those who make themselves great will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be made great.

Jesus told a story of two men who went to the Temple to pray. The first was a Pharisee, who stood apart, by himself, to pray. He stood apart. He separated himself. He differentiated himself from everybody else. It's just him and God, having a talk. Actually, it's him doing all the talking, telling God how grateful he is -- grateful to God or to himself? -- grateful that he is not like all the rest.

He is glad and proud that he is a good man, not like everybody else, not like them, the greedy ones, the dishonest ones, the unfaithful ones, because they are ... despicable!

The other was a tax collector, an agent of the Roman occupiers. He stood alone, too, at a distance, keeping his distance, not getting too close to anybody else, not even getting too close to God, not presuming he even belongs here, but needing to come here, needing to cry out to God: "God, have pity on me, a sinner!" Despicable ... me.

And Jesus said that he was the one who was in the right with God when he went home that day. Because? Because he asked God to be God. Because he asked God to be merciful, to have pity on him, to meet his own weakness with God's unmatched power.

The Pharisee didn't ask God for anything. He didn't need to ask God for anything. He didn't need God. He didn't need God and he didn't need other people. He didn't need love, from God or anyone else, and he didn't offer love, to God or to anyone else.

Jesus told the story of two men, a Pharisee and a tax collector, who went to the Temple to pray, but the story is not about Pharisees and tax collectors! To whom does Jesus address the parable?

He is not speaking to tax collectors, to encourage them and to show them the way to be right with God. Jesus did encourage tax collectors and other disreputables like them, but more by showing than by telling, by spending time with them, by paying attention to them, by welcoming them, by loving them.

And Jesus' parable is not addressed to the Pharisees, to challenge them, to confront them with their hypocrisy and shallow piety. Jesus did criticize the Pharisees, often, but this parable is not for them.

To whom, then, does Jesus address the parable?

Jesus told this parable to people who were sure of their own goodness and despised everybody else.

To people who were sure of their own goodness and despised everybody else, whoever and wherever they may be, whoever and wherever they may be even among those gathered around him. Jesus had been just telling his own disciples another parable, the parable about the persistent woman who never gives up, so presumably Luke intends for us to believe that Jesus is still speaking ... to his disciples! Or, in other words, Jesus is speaking to us. If the shoe fits!

Those who are sure of their own goodness and despise everybody else.

Sound familiar? Did you listen to the third presidential debate Wednesday night? This is the tenor of this campaign, not “you are wrong,” but “you are despicable,” not arguing values or policies, but name-calling and personal attacks.

“Such a nasty woman.”

“Deplorables ...”

You see, it’s not about one candidate or one party or even one particular election. This is the tenor of all our politics, the politics we have created. Because you reap what you sow. We applaud aggressiveness, machismo, people who know what they want and do whatever it takes to get it. And we want leaders who will get us what we want, who will do whatever it takes to get it done. We want leaders who are confident, strong, even brash, not backing down, not giving an inch, certain of themselves, making us feel certain they can deliver on their promises.

We want leaders who are great and who will make American great. Yes, that may be the slogan of one of the candidates, but it is what we want and expect of all our candidates, because we expect to be great. We believe greatness to be our calling, our destiny. We believe in American exceptionalism, that we are not like all the rest.

Those who make themselves great will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be made great.

Does this apply? Does Jesus’ saying have political implications?

It most certainly does, because humility, understanding place, understanding what you are and what you are not, acknowledging not only your own value and addressing not only your own needs, but acknowledging and addressing the value and needs of other people, of all the other people, is the foundation of love, and love is foundation of human well-being, and human well-being is the goal of all politics.

Why is it that one of the cardinal virtues of the kingdom of God and the cornerstone of the politics of Jesus -- humility -- has no place, absolutely no place, in our politics?

Who do we think we are? Look around! Look to the horizon and beyond. See layer upon layer of earth and sea and sky. See humanity upon humanity. See their faces. See each face. Hear the cries of their hearts.

Does the world belong to us? Does the world bow to us? Do we believe we are intended to be this world's savior? That is blasphemy! That is idolatry!

Those who are sure of their own goodness and despise everybody else.

Sound familiar? Is Jesus addressing you?

I don't know. I cannot speak for you. You will have to let Jesus' parable search your own heart and mind and soul. But, as for me?

Sure of my own goodness? Well ...

And despising? To despise is to feel contempt, to look down on, to feel better than, to find someone or someones pitiful, deplorable, despicable. Whom do I look down on? Whom do I feel better than? Whom do I find despicable? Donald Trump? Hillary Clinton? Socialists? Communists? Fundamentalists? Liberals? Immigrants? Indigents? Street people? Wall Streeters? Tax collectors? Politicians? Panhandlers?

Or maybe just that one, that thorn in my side, the one who seems to go out of the way to make life miserable for me, that despicable one!

Jesus said the tax collector was right with God when he went home, the one who cried, "God, have mercy on me ... despicable me!"