

Nothing

Luke 18:9-14

October 27, 2013

Well, I'm feeling good.

I'm feeling good because this story has nothing to do with me! Luke says that Jesus told this story, this parable about a Pharisee and a tax collector, to people who were sure of their own goodness and despised everybody else. But that's not me! I don't despise everybody else. I care about people. I show everybody respect. I am kind to everybody. I am a good person.

Once there were two men standing and silently praying in the church hallway, a minister and a panhandler.

The minister was praying: "I thank you, God, that I am kind and respectful and compassionate, not like this man coming to me asking for help, making up a story he thinks will make me feel sorry for him, using me, using the system, taking no responsibility for his own life. I am responsible. I am honest. I take care of myself, and people like him, too!"

And the panhandler was praying: "God, have pity on me!"

And Jesus said: "The panhandler and not the minister was right with God that day. For those who make themselves great will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be made great."

Once there were two men who walked by each other on the sidewalk on Sycamore Street. One was an investment broker returning to the office after lunch and one was a paroled felon on his way back to the facility after a failed job interview.

The investment broker quickened his pace as he passed the other man, switched his briefcase to the other side and prayed to himself: "Thank God, I work hard at my job and provide for my family and help my clients provide for theirs. Thank God, I am not like this man, in and out of jail, thinking only about himself, if he's thinking at all, somebody nobody can depend on, a burden to his family and a blight on our community. This community is better off because of the money and time I contribute. My church is better off because of the money and time I contribute. My family is better off because of me."

The paroled felon looked down at his feet as he passed the other man and prayed: "God, have mercy on me, a sinner!"

And Jesus said: "The felon and not the broker was right with God that day. For those who make themselves great will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be made great."

Once there were two women sitting next to each other in the pews on Sunday morning. One was a mother, a lawyer's wife and a member of the Junior League, and the other a mother, but not a mother anymore, because DHS had just that week moved her children out of her house and into foster care.

The Junior League volunteer kept glancing at the other woman, thinking and praying to herself: "I thank you, God, for the path I have chosen and faithfully followed -- for the education I completed, for the service I give to this church, for the service I give to this community, for the good choice I made of a husband and for the good job I do as a wife and a mother. I thank you, God, I am not like her, putting herself before her kids, moving from one man to another, from bad relationship to worse, giving herself to anybody who'll pay her some attention, neglecting the ones who need her. My husband and my community sing my praises and I am proud of all I have sacrificed. I am proud of all I have done for them.

The mother with no children stared straight ahead, her eyes open, her attention fixed on the front of the sanctuary as she whispered, almost aloud: "God, have mercy on me, a sinner!"

And Jesus said: "The mother with no children and not the Junior Leaguer was right with God that day. For those who make themselves great will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be made great."

Once there were two children sitting on the chancel steps listening to a children's lesson about being thankful, one a young girl and the other a young boy.

The young girl thought of everything she was thankful for: her parents, her school and her teachers and her church, her room in her house and all her clothes and all her jewelry and all her stuff. And she thought of how thankful she was that she was not like that boy. He was messy and rough, always getting in trouble, always having to stay after school, fighting and using bad language. He didn't really have a house or his own room, but spent one week

here, another week there. Nobody liked him, but everybody liked her and she was glad.

The young boy could think of nothing to be thankful for, but thought to himself: "Please, God, if you are there, take care of me, because I don't have anybody else!"

And Jesus said: "The young boy and not the young girl went home right with God that day. For those who make themselves great will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be made great."

As I was saying, I'm glad this story ... isn't ... about me? If you have ears to hear ...

But listen carefully. Jesus is not saying that there is anything inherently good about being a tax collector, or a panhandler, or a convicted criminal, or an unfit mother, or a misfit child. Neither is Jesus saying that there is anything inherently bad about being a Pharisee, or a minister, or a successful businessman, or a community volunteer, or a good girl. What Jesus is saying ... What is Jesus saying?

That the distinctions we like to make between ourselves and our neighbors don't really matter? Yes.

That being right with God is not about having enough going for us that we are able to justify ourselves to God? Yes.

That all our good choices, all our good deeds, all our good intentions, don't really matter to God? Let's not answer that one yet.

What Jesus is saying is made very clear. Those who make themselves great will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be made great. The point is: live-a-humble. Humble yourself.

What do we have, any of us -- you or me -- that we can hold up to God and say: "There, this makes me all right with you?" Nothing!

What can any of us -- you or me -- point to and say: "This gives God good reason to commend me?" Nothing!

What do we have, any of us -- you or me -- that we can hold up against someone else as proof that we deserve more credit, that we have done a better job, that we are better than they are? Nothing!

Because as soon as I try to justify myself, commend myself, prove myself better than someone else, I have put myself in the wrong with God. Those who make themselves great will be humbled. In the presence of God -- in the presence of the holy and righteous God, creator, sustainer, savior and Lord of all that is! -- what do we have to say for ourselves? Nothing! We stand before God, all of us, naked and speechless and helpless and humbled.

So back to that question. What we do doesn't matter?

No, what you do does matter. But you cannot take credit for what you do or what you have or what you are. Or did you give yourself life? Did you birth yourself from your mother's womb? Did you teach yourself how to eat, how to learn, how to live, how to love?

Humility means acknowledging your dependence. Humility means acknowledging your debt. Humility means giving credit where credit is due.

All is gift! So much of what you are and have and do, you are and have and do by the generous help and solicitude of the people around you.

All is gift! All of what you are and have and do, you are and have and do by the grace of God!

All is gift! You have no reason to be proud, but every reason to be grateful, and humble. "There, but for the grace of God, go I." Absolutely, but we confuse its meaning. We say it and mean: "I'm sure glad, I'm surely thankful, that I am not in his shoes, that I am not him." But you are him! There you go, except for the grace of God. Anything you are, anything you have, anything you do, is by the grace of God alone!

We have been talking for seven weeks now about the distinctive marks of the followers of Jesus. According to Luke's gospel ...

Followers of Jesus want one thing, just one thing.

Followers of Jesus are marked by generosity of spirit: welcoming, loving, including.

Followers of Jesus don't have stuff. They use stuff to serve and to bless.

Followers of Jesus use whatever faith they have, even if it is no more than the size of a mustard seed, because that's enough!

Followers of Jesus are grateful, and it is their gratitude that makes them well.

Followers of Jesus ask God for help and never give up!

And followers of Jesus are marked by humility. Humility is not an easy mark to recognize, because it does not show itself off. It is simply a way of being, but it can be identified by its effects.

Humble people are generous, because they know that all they have really belongs to the One who gave it to them.

Humble people are attentive. They have nothing to prove, no need to draw attention or praise, so they have time and space and opportunity to pay attention to other people, to what other people think and feel and want.

Humble people are supportive and complimentary, because they understand that lifting someone else up takes nothing away from them, since they are already nothing!

And humble people seem, humble people are, close to God, right with God, in touch with God, because nothing -- nothing! -- gets in the way!

And as for the proud, those who make themselves great? They will be humbled ... and then they will be OK!