Don’t Point Fingers Too Quickly

Luke 18:9-14

Grace Hills Baptist Church

October 16, 2016

A couple of years ago, I happened to be in Kroger one afternoon. Now, this is a small town, and we don’t have all that many places we can go to shop. Inevitably, I run into one or more people from Grace Hills when I go into Kroger or Walmart; in fact, one man who comes to Bible study and I almost literally ran into each other recently on the paper towel aisle of Walmart. It’s not all that unusual. But on this particular day a couple years back, I came around the corner at Kroger and saw one of our young families from here at the church. One young child, probably about 3 or 4, I can’t remember now, knew me – but he was shocked. Why? Because to that child, I was “Pastor Adam”…and that meant I must ONLY be at the church. To this child’s mind, I probably LIVED at the church, and seeing me in Kroger was an utter and complete surprise.

This isn’t just true for pastors. I’ve been around teachers all of my life, so I was never surprised to see them places other than at school – but I had friends who were always caught a bit off-guard when Mrs. Davis or Mrs. Owen were down at the ballfield or in line at the Tasty Freeze. Doctors, off-duty police officers, school bus drivers – all of them catch kids by surprise when they see them somewhere other than where they usually are. It’s kind of fun, actually, to see the kids’ reaction; I bet it would make a fun bit on Candid Camera.

Why is it that children are so astonished to see their teacher, or their pastor, or their doctor somewhere other than the school, the church, and the doctor’s office? Because they have a very one-dimensional perspective on these people. To a young child, a teacher is a teacher, not a person who has a spouse and kids, who walks the dog and watches Game of Thrones or The Big Bang Theory. A pastor reads the Bible and talks about Jesus; he or she doesn’t browse the produce and stock up on ice cream and popcorn. We understand that – that’s how young children view the world.

Yet we aren’t always that different than them. We often paint people with broad brushes, and view them only through one lens. We draw conclusions based on one perspective. They are black or white. They are old or young. They are rich or poor. They are gay or straight. They are conservative or liberal. They are Hokies or Hoos. And if we aren’t careful, that’s all they are to us: a one-dimensional part of the background of our lives instead of a living, breathing, complex person who may or may not fit all of our assumptions about them. And this is especially true of people we don’t know or who interact only momentarily with us: the waitress, the cashier, the telemarketer, the trash dumpster attendant, the homeless guy. Pretty much anyone who we let be one-dimensional, often because we either consciously or unconsciously think we’re better than them.

Jesus understood that this is something all of us do, at least from time to time. That’s why he told a story about it in our text for this morning. He was on his way up to Jerusalem, somewhere between Samaria and Galilee, and had just healed some lepers. One of them was a Samaritan; good Jews like Jesus’ disciples looked down on both lepers and Samaritans. Then he encountered and corrected some Pharisees, who often debated Jesus and challenged his disciples. And finally Jesus turned to his disciples and began to instruct them, giving them special insight into both the plans of God and the need for prayer.

Apparently, at this point, there were some standing there who were starting to get a little puffed up, thinking highly of themselves. Maybe James and John took pride in the fact that they were Jews, not those filthy Samaritans. Maybe Philip and Bartholomew were looking down on the lepers, who were viewed as unclean by upstanding citizens. Maybe Simon the Zealot was taking a bit of extra delight in the dressing-down Jesus had given the Pharisees, or Simon Peter was feeling important because Jesus had revealed something special to him and the other disciples. What we know is that at least some of them were feeling a bit sure of themselves – and, significant to this passage, were therefore looking down on others. Jesus noticed, and so he told this story.

The story starts with two men, two Jews, going up to the Temple to pray. There were special times and days of prayer, but the Temple itself was always open for worshippers of God to come in and commune with God. Rich, poor, holy, “regular joe,” it didn’t matter; if you were Jewish (and male, for the inner court of the Temple) you could wander in and say your prayers. That’s apparently what these two men were doing.

The first is a Pharisee. Pharisees get a bad rap these days, but in the time of Jesus, they were pretty good folks. They were really, really devoted to the Bible, and tried to live faithfully by the commandments of God. Not only that, they sacrificed of their own income to help others and taught throughout Judea and Galilee, trying to encourage others to become more faithful Jews. They were the kind of people you’d want to have as neighbors, because they would get your mail in when you were gone, you could trust them when your children were playing in the yard, and you could know that they wouldn’t be throwing any parties that would get too out of hand or damage your property. And this guy, the guy in Jesus’ story, is a model Pharisee in most respects. It’s a given that he tried hard to obey the teachings of Moses; that’s what Pharisees did. But he went beyond what was required. For example, Jews were required to fast as a spiritual discipline only on designated holy days; this man fasted twice a week to build his relationship with God. He was also scrupulous in giving away a full tenth of all of his income. And he was coming into the Temple of his own volition to pray. By all measures that we have, this is a good guy who is faithful to God.

The other man who wandered into the Temple to pray that day is someone we know little about. We don’t know his religious background. We don’t have any record of his deeds or his misdeeds. We don’t know his hometown or his marital status. We only know three things. First, we know he is a Jew, else he would not be able to enter the same part of the Temple to pray as the Pharisee. Second, we know that he is a tax collector. We’re going to be hearing a lot about tax collectors in the next few weeks, but for now, it’s enough to know that they worked for Rome and were widely seen (sometimes unfairly) as traitors and greedy thieves. And finally, we know that this nameless tax collector has come to pray out of his faith in the God of Israel. Whether or not he is a faithful Jew to the same extent as the Pharisee, and whether or not he is fleecing his neighbors or simply trying to get by in life under Roman occupation, we know this tax collector has faith in God – at least enough to acknowledge his own sin and ask for mercy.

There in the Temple, then, we have two men, two Jews, two people of faith praying to their Lord – the SAME Lord. What, if any, difference is there between them? The difference is found in the stance and stature of the Pharisee. He was a good man, a faithful man – and he knew it. He believed there *weren’t* any better Jews than he was. He was the greatest, the *most* faithful, the *most* generous, the *most* holy. Well, maybe that was overstating it a little bit…but surely, he was better than *this* man, this, this…*tax collector*!

How easy it is to look down on others, to point fingers at the people we perceive to be the losers in life or, worse, those we deem to be somehow tainted. We can build ourselves up on the backs of those who are less fortunate or who have made some choices we disagree with in their lives, and that can leave us feeling pretty good about ourselves. We all have our “rogues’ list,” a catalog of those we self-righteously condemn to second-class status, an inventory of undesirables we don’t feel bad about pointing our fingers at. That list may be based on race, gender, politics, economics, personal behavior, or some combination of the above, but the list is real. And consciously or unconsciously, we put ourselves in the place of the Pharisee, highlighting our own goodness while only seeing the negatives we perceive in others so that we look better, whether before God, others, or even just ourselves. “I’m a good person – and at least I’m better than *them*!”

Our culture doesn’t help us any with this either, does it? Walk through a supermarket checkout line and you’ll find cover after cover of tabloids tearing people down, especially if they have a few flaws that they struggle with. Check out Facebook or Twitter and you’ll hear politicians of all stripes, and their supporters, pointing out over and over how much worse their opponent is – not on political issues, but on personal behavior – all while trying to minimize their own foibles and misdeeds. Movie stars, athletes, radio personalities, singers – all of these public persons are in the business of making themselves look good, even if it means walking all over their competitors. And slowly, news report by news report, tabloid article by tabloid article, Facebook post by Facebook post, we find our prejudices reaffirmed, our fears reinforced, and our self-righteousness validated even more than it already was – just like the Pharisee.

Yet the Pharisee didn’t see the full picture. He didn’t know the tax collector at all, as near as we can tell. He didn’t know if this man tried to live by the commandments and was an honest tax collector, or not. He didn’t know whether it was need – to feed his family – or greed – to line his pockets – that drove this man to collect revenue for the Romans. He didn’t know if this man had accumulated a record of bad behavior, or if he was trying to be a good Jew. The Pharisee just flat-out didn’t know – and so he looked at his fellow worshipper and saw him with one-dimensional eyes.

That, Jesus said, was his fundamental flaw, and the warning he had for his own self-righteous and contemptuous disciples was a simple one: don’t be like this guy. Oh, sure, it is good for us to emulate his devotion to the Scriptures and his conscientious attention to prayer, fasting, and tithes. But there is something bigger here, something more timely for Jesus’ disciples, because they are feeling a bit full of themselves. They are starting to look down on others – or at least feeling the temptation – people like Samaritans and lepers and tax collectors. So Jesus tells them this story, a story where the Pharisee, the righteous one, doesn’t go home justified, or made right, with God…because he didn’t really SEE his fellow worshipper.

Presbyterian pastor Randolph Harris put the Pharisee’s problem this way: “In short, the Pharisee’s prayer embodies a way of being in the world that is devoid of the very relationships that characterize life in God’s realm: love for God and love for neighbor. How can he love God when he is so full of himself? How can he love his neighbors when he sees only their sinful shortcomings? For all of his scrupulous obedience to the commandments, he has missed the forest for the trees.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

Oh, how I hope we won’t miss the forest for the trees! Every day, we meet people we overlook, we ignore, we take for granted. Sometimes, we even meet people we feel superior to, people we point our fingers at. We may have our problems being faithful to God and our struggles living the lives we should live, but at least we aren’t like *them*! My prayer is that we can shift our outlook just a bit, choosing to see others not through one-dimensional eyes, but through eyes that see as God sees: children of God who might just be trying to get right with their Lord, the same as you and me.

One of the best female preachers in America today is Barbara Brown Taylor. She has a way with words and with stories that draws a congregation in, not just explaining what the Scriptures mean, but helping put flesh and blood on the bare bones of the biblical account. She has often challenged her congregations and readers of her books to see the practice of encountering others as an act of faith, seeing them as strangers in whom Christ may be present to us – even if they are Pharisees or tax collectors. But she recognizes that it can be hard to start with the most difficult folks or the most challenging situations. She suggests starting with simply noticing the people who are right in front of us:

“The next time you go to the grocery store,” she says, “try engaging the cashier. You do not have to invite her home for lunch or anything, but take a look at her face while she is trying to find ‘arugula’ on her laminated list of produce. Here is someone who exists even when she is not ringing up your groceries, as hard as that may be for you to imagine. She is someone’s daughter, maybe someone’s mother as well. She has a home she returns to when she hangs up her apron here, a kitchen that smells of last night’s supper, a bed where she occasionally lies awake at night wrestling with her own demons and angels.

“‘You saved eleven dollars and six cents by shopping at Winn Dixie today,’ she says looking right at you. All that is required is that you look back. Just meet her eyes for a moment when you say ‘Thanks.’ Sometimes that is all another person needs to know that she has been seen – not the cashier but the person.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

It’s all too easy for us to be the people who are so wrapped up in ourselves, so convinced that we are better than “those people” – whoever “those people” may be – that we miss seeing them as the people they really are, the children of God they really are. And when we do, we run the same risk the Pharisee ran in Jesus’ story. There is no sign the tax collector even knew what the Pharisee was praying – but Jesus said only one of them went home right with God that day in the Temple. Do we want to go through life being full of ourselves, looking down our noses, and missing the forest for the trees? Or do we want to learn to be humble, actually see people for who they are, and go home right with God? All who exalt themselves will be humbled, Jesus says, but all who humble themselves will be exalted. Let’s be careful not to point our fingers at others too quickly – because that’s not the way of Jesus. Let us pray.

1. Feasting on the Gospels, Luke v. 2, p. 137 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. An Altar in the World, Barbara Brown Taylor, p. 94 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)