

ST BART'S



A Sermon by:

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A Simple Story Hits Home

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The Twenty-Third Sunday after Pentecost—Based on Luke 18:9-14*

At last a story so obvious that it preaches itself! Compared to the gospel lessons of the last few weeks, this is like taking candy from a baby! Finally we have one that is utterly simple and straightforward with no questions about who is who. The good guy is clearly the good guy, and the bad guy is unmistakably the bad one. It is a bible story like we like our bible stories!

While it may be just that simple, it never hurts to take a brief look anyway. It is worth remembering that the Pharisees have been painted to be worse than they really were. At that time there were essentially two classes of Jews—those in the aristocracy, who were largely complicit with the Romans, hardly observant at all, and therefore visited with all of the luxuries that their allegiance provided them, and then the other and larger group, the very poor who barely managed to eke out a living. The Pharisees were sort of in the middle, often well-intended and desirous of bringing back faithfulness among Jews. Their purpose, which we often miss in our too easy dismissal of them as the bad guys, was to translate Jewish law in a way that was, contrary to popular opinion, accessible to all. Like us, their problem was that they were not perfect practitioners of what they preached.

The Tax Collector, on the other hand, was indeed humble in this story about humility. But trust me: he had a great deal to be humble about. Probably living in what appeared to be and most likely was the lap of luxury, he had accumulated great riches on the backs of the people of Israel. He was not the nice IRS employee living down the street. Way beyond what we can imagine, way beyond what the Tea Party can imagine, taxes were not reasonable and the services derived from them were assuredly not available to the poor. In our way of perfectly completing stories, we conclude that the humbled Tax Collector, who could not even lift his eyes to God, would get up a redeemed man, committed to making amends. My honest guess is that he did, and that he is indeed the good guy in this story, a man at the beginning of a new life. As for this particular Pharisee, he at this moment had allowed religious conscientiousness to become so overblown in his life that, though he was indeed doing everything right, following every law, he was missing the point and the spirit of it. He was neither the first nor the last religious soul to so err. But it is when we go beyond the actual details of the story and begin to think about our lives that the story really begins to work on us. As we heard it read, most of us probably thought to ourselves, "Well, thank God, I am at least not like that Pharisee." And suddenly the story has turned on its head and is about us as much as it is about anyone. It is not that we would often truly say something as outrageous as the Pharisee said, but we often engage in what he did in one way or another, which was to define himself by comparison to another. It happens all the time. We feel best about ourselves when we know that there are those who are much worse than we are. Instead of dealing primarily with our truth, the good and the bad, the clear and the unclear, the hopes and the fears—all that goes into making us who we are. Instead of that, we use shorthand to understand ourselves through comparison to others.

The political discourse in our country at the present time is replete with examples of how we do this; and, my friends, both sides do it. I do it. My side/your side is at its brilliant best when it is condemning the other side. Small wonder there is room for so little decency at almost every level of political life. If, for example, I am a Democrat and cannot honestly imagine having a good friend who is a Republican, I am in big trouble—and not just politically but spiritually. Politically such an attitude ends discussion and precludes the possibility of compromise upon which successful public policy ultimately is built. And spiritually it means

that I have denied my baptismal vows, which require that I seek and serve Christ in all others, those who agree with me and those who don't. Refusing to "see" a person in the other party, either by literally choosing not to look at him/her or by looking at him/her as a closed story with no room for movement or any other evidence of humanness, is not to seek and serve Christ in that person.

The bottom line is that when I begin to think that Jesus surely must feel the exact same way I do about "the other side," I know that I am in trouble. It is at those moments that I begin not to like this simple straightforward little gospel story as much as I thought I did—for at that moment it has begun to step on my toes.

And here is where it really gets hard. It is one thing to act un-Christ-like in the political realm. But when it comes to religious experience, we are on particularly thin ice. Like most of the world, I am smitten with the new Pope for his openness. Parenthetically, when I have said this to some of my crowd, several have said, "Well, he has quite a way to go before everything is okay." Translated, that means he is still not nearly as good as we are. Here is the truth, one that I need to hear over and over: It is not a contest to see who can get closest to the "right" answer about anything. It is not even a contest to see who can get closer to God. It is just about each of us getting as close to God as possible. Of all the comments reported of Pope Francis, the one I love the most is a response he made to a question about sexual orientation. When asked about gay people, he said the most extraordinary thing: "If a gay person tells me he is in relationship with God, who am I to say he is not?"

Who indeed? Who indeed was the Pharisee to say anything about the worth of the Tax Collector's prayer? Who indeed are we?

I love the cover of the insert in our bulletin each week—so much so in fact that I mention it in the announcements every Sunday particularly to call it to the attention of visitors. It is a statement about who we at St. Bart's hope we are, the things we are for, the things we say we are against. And I love it; I in fact treasure what it claims to be true about our way of being religious in a modern and pluralistic world. But I believe that I—and we—need to be careful not to be arrogant about it. If we find ourselves loving this statement because it describes something very different from what we believe others to be like, if for some of us it is proudly representative of that from which we have come, we need to be careful that it has no ring in it of "thank God, I am not like them."

Jesus, I believe, in this story is trying to show how dangerous religion can be when it becomes too certain. The real heroism of the Tax Collector is that in this moment of significant religious experience, his energy was where it needed to be: between God and him. The Pharisee, on the other hand, had succumbed to the danger of certainty about others and himself—of his correctness and the wrongness of the other. The reason this story still makes us squirm is that we too often succumb to such assuredness. Perhaps we harbor generalized feelings about other religions, e.g., about all Muslims, "those people," though I suspect we as a group are more examined about that and call ourselves on that kind of thinking pretty quickly. What we are more likely to be less self-reflective about are our feelings toward those in our own religion, those who are most different from us, the far religious right. In the wake of this gospel lesson, there is no room for smugness in our prayer, "thank God, we are not like them"—no matter how deeply we may disagree.

Words in religion, though I love them and can't do without them, are dangerous if we use them to compare ourselves to others. Maybe our mothers and Miss Manners were actually correct about not talking about religion and politics. It is not that actions will not get us in trouble; they may from time to time. But actions that flow from our understanding of how much God loves us—and all the people of the world—get us in trouble for much better reasons.

In the name of God: *Amen.*