

Give Us This Day Our Daily Humility

In his book, *Who Needs God*, Rabbi Harold Kushner tells the story of a Stanford student who planned to become a doctor. Like many of his classmates, he was exceedingly driven, though he tried hard not to show it. His transcript was so impressive at the end of his sophomore year, that his proud parents rewarded him with a summer trip to the Far East. While there, he met a guru who rocked his world. “Don’t you see how you are poisoning your soul with this success oriented way of life? Your idea of happiness is to stay up all night studying for an exam so you can get a better grade than your best friend. Your idea of a good marriage is not to find the woman who will make you whole, but to win the girl that everyone else wants...Give it up; come join us in an atmosphere where we all love each other.” The young man signed on. He called his bewildered parents from Tokyo and told them he wasn’t coming home. He was dropping out of school to live in an ashram.

Six months later, his parents received a letter from him: “Dear Mom and Dad, I know you weren’t happy with the decision I made last summer, but I want to tell you how happy it has made me. For the first time in my life, I am at peace. Here there is no competing, no hustling, no trying to get ahead of anyone else. Here we are all equal, and we all share. This way of life is so much in harmony with the inner essence of my soul that in only six months I’ve become the number two disciple in the entire ashram, and I think I can be number one by June!” (*Who Needs God*, Harold Kushner, p. 97)

Humility – defined, as a modest or low view of one’s own importance – is a central theme in the gospel we just heard. “All who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.” How do you preach on humility without succumbing to spiritual pride? It is one of the great spiritual paradoxes. Be humble. As soon as we have arrived at a suitable state of humility, we are tempted to take pride in our accomplishment.

The gospel today is a parable, a simple story to illustrate a moral or spiritual lesson, and it’s often hard to hear these without placing yourself in one role or the other – am I a Pharisee or a tax collector? I’m at this beautiful church while my friend is out playing a round of golf on this gorgeous day. I’m thinking about my neighbor or family member in the other political party that simply does not understand what is best for our nation. To the contrary, I am a mess and feel like I am one inch from hitting the bottom. Or, I just made a huge mistake that could cost me my job or reputation or both. It’s a parable that can

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tell us something about ourselves. Make us twinge at the thought of acting like a self-righteous Pharisee or inspire us with the humility of a tax collector. In between the lines it also tells us about a God of mercy. It should not be lost on us that this gospel is paired in the common lectionary today with Psalm 65 that Sairus read – a beautiful illustration of God’s people coming together with an awareness of our neediness and God’s generosity in reaching toward us with mercy: perhaps a starting point for thinking about not only gratitude, but humility as well. In the parable, Jesus communicates and expands these profound truths in a story about two men praying in a temple. In typical fashion, we are reminded that appearances can be deceiving. The one called holy by society walks away from the temple still entangled in his grandiose self-righteousness. The one reviled by religious people went down to his home justified. The status quo is reversed: *For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.*” Or as another translation puts it: *“If you walk around with your nose in the air, you’re going to end up flat on your face, but if you’re content to be simply yourself, you will become more than yourself.”* (The Message)

I was struck in the days leading up to the United States government shutdown by the visibility and press granted in the news to the current Senate chaplain, a Seventh-day Adventist and former Navy rear admiral, Barry C. Black. In his role as chaplain, a non-partisan position that has existed since 1789, he acts as a sounding board, spiritual adviser and ethical counselor to members of the Senate. Wearing brightly colored bow ties, the chaplain’s prayers each morning some suggested sounded like a daily ministerial scolding or in my mind a modern day parable. “Save us from the madness. We acknowledge our transgressions, our shortcomings, our smugness, our selfishness and our pride. Deliver us from the hypocrisy of attempting to sound reasonable while being unreasonable,” Chaplain Black prayed. The clear, steady, calm and direct calling out of abuse of power, accountability and responsibility was unmistakable. “May they remember that all that is necessary for unintended catastrophic consequences is for good people to do nothing,” he prayed on another day. (NY Times, Oct 6, 2013) I have found the pre and post government shutdown trajectory exasperating, demoralizing and humiliating to public servants and to citizenship here and everywhere. Times like these can surely cause despair and disgust, but as someone once reminded me: “I do not keep a chair for it; I will not entertain it. It is not allowed to eat from my plate.”

Traveling to attend two professional conferences this month has given me the opportunity, as it often does, for deeper reflection: What is my work in this world and what I am giving to it? I am an Episcopal priest, university chaplain serving in a phenomenal institution of higher education with extraordinary

students and colleagues and a citizen of this free and democratic nation. It is exhilarating, bewildering and humbling all at the same time.

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It also gives one an interesting vantage point. It has given me the chance to see both the incomparable gifts and the stunning weaknesses of people and institutions from both afar, and up close and personal. It's a peculiar and profound vocation all at the same time. It often takes my breath away. There are days that I love it, and other days not so much. It is a mixture of delight and disappointment in all of its manifestations. It is a story of Pharisees and tax collectors over and over again. It's sometimes weird, it's often wonderful and I can't imagine doing anything else.

Needless to say, it can be seductive to trust in ourselves as righteous and to regard others with contempt. The scene playing itself out on our political and congressional national landscape could certainly qualify as exhibit A. Writer Frank Schaeffer notes this problem as launching a civil war as thoroughly destructive here in the US as is the civil war raging between extremists and terrorists across the Arab world. "They do it with suicide vests," he writes, "we just did it with the shutdown and flirting with default." Schaeffer contends that America is two countries: a nation of blacks, Latinos, gays, women, Democrat voting liberals, union workers, atheists, agnostics, Jews, progressive Christians, Hindus, Muslims and those who answer none to religious affiliation. It's also another nation of white fundamentalists, religious right evangelicals and Roman Catholic traditionalists. All of who seem to have moments of Pharisee like righteous indignation and contempt for each other. People on all sides are in terrible pain. Some have been overconfident and insensitive, shocked when others push back and lashed out. Others are willing to follow hucksters to their destruction. Can we find ways to come together for common cause?

Ultimately, the two prayers in our parable today seem to highlight a preference for humility over arrogance. The prayers of the Pharisee and the tax collector draw a strong connection between piety and ethics and also seem to hold central concern for right living. The Pharisee's prayer is overturned by God's justice. It's reverses the hierarchy of honor and prestige that favor the dominant classes in that society. The tax collector's prayer draws us to consider the depth of God's great mercy. The grievances of a tax collector were undoubtedly real and serious. They stole from those they taxed and pocketed the money for themselves; they collaborated with the oppressors of their own people; they accepted bribes as a matter of routine. If a tax collector can find mercy before God, who is excluded?

Jeremy Peters reported in the NY Times that in one of his daily morning prayers of late Senate Chaplain Black turned his attention to the senators. "Remove from them that stubborn pride which imagines itself to be above and beyond criticism. Forgive them the blunders they have committed."

Senator Harry Reid, the pugnacious majority leader that has called his Republican adversaries anarchists and hostage takers took note. As Admiral

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Black spoke, Mr. Reid, whose head was bowed in prayer, apparently broke his concentration and looked straight up at the chaplain. “Following the suggestion in the prayer, the majority leader said afterward, seemingly contrite, I think we’ve all here in the Senate lost the aura of Robert Byrd, one of the historical giants of the Senate, who prized gentility and compromise.” And I might add a balance of humility.

Is there any way back from this current civil war? In her poem, *Councils*, author Marge Piercy offers a suggestion.

We must sit down and reason together. We must sit down: men standing want to hold forth. Perhaps we should sit in the dark. In the dark we could utter our feelings. In the dark we could propose and describe and suggest. In the dark we could not see who speaks and only the words would say what they say. No one would speak more than twice. No one would speak less than once. Thus saying what we feel and what we want, what we fear for ourselves and each other into the dark, perhaps we could begin to begin to listen. Perhaps we should talk in groups the size of new families, not more, never more than twenty. Perhaps we should start by speaking softly. The women must learn to dare to speak; the men must learn to bother to listen. The women must learn to say I think this is so. The men must learn to stop dancing solos on the ceiling...

I am often reminded and humbled, by the tenacity and courage of those whom I am privileged to stand with and by on this campus, by those who are at the crux of discerning their own vocations and purpose, and by my own trust in a great and mysterious God – it is here I find immense strength to confront self-righteous Pharisees without being one or falling prey to one. The kingdom, the reign of rightly ordered power that is near to us in the life and example of one named Christ is free from the tyranny of the self righteous and ultimately directs us to more life, more full and abundant. Not just for some but for all. It is a vision of human flourishing that neither the Pharisee nor the tax collector was fully able to grasp. Whether this news deepens our dependence on a merciful God or gives us our voice – it is a needed and transforming witness in these shadowy times.

Some time ago I was given and profoundly impacted by an essay written by Dr. Clarissa Pinkola Estes, an author, poet, and post-trauma specialist.

To conclude, I wanted to share a portion of it with you for its remarkable clarity, incisiveness and humility in its own right.

Dr. Estes wrote: “I have heard from so many recently who are deeply and properly bewildered. They are concerned about the state of affairs in our world right now. Ours is a time of daily astonishment and often-righteous rage over

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the latest degradations of what matters most to civilized, visionary people. You are right in your assessments. The luster and hubris some have aspired to while endorsing acts so heinous against children, elders, everyday people, the poor, the unguarded, the helpless, is breathtaking. Yet, I urge you, gentle you, to please not spend your spirit dry by bewailing these difficult times. Especially do not lose hope. Most particularly because, the fact is that we were made for these times. Yes. For years, we have been learning, practicing, been in training for and just waiting to meet on this exact plain of engagement.”

She goes on to use the imagery and metaphor of a seaworthy vessel as analogous to awakened souls. Souls like you and me. She contends that there have never been more able vessels in the waters than there are right now across the world. Look out over the prow she says. There are millions of boats of souls on the waters with you.

“Ours is not the task of fixing the entire world all at once, but of stretching out to mend the part of the world that is within our reach. It is not given to us to know which acts or by whom, will cause the critical mass to tip toward an enduring good. What is needed is an accumulation of acts, adding, adding to, adding more, continuing.”

Dr. Estes’ profound essay concludes this way: “The good words and the good deeds we do are not ours: they are the words and deeds of the One who brought us here. In that spirit, I hope you will write this on your wall: When a great ship is in harbor and moored, it is safe, there can be no doubt. But that is not what

great ships are built for. This comes with much love and a prayer that you remember who you came from, and why you came to this beautiful, needful Earth.”

Indeed, give us this day our daily humility.

Amen.

Notes:

Clarissa Pinkola Estes, Temple of Solace, We Were Made For These Times, 2011.