

Making Room

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All right, I have a rather unchristian confession to make –arrogant, self-absorbed people really drive me crazy! Maybe they have the same effect on you all as well? Whenever I encounter them during a meeting, on the basketball court or even grocery shopping, I am left speechless. You have one of two options in dealing with them – you can either agree with their proclamations and diatribes or you can disagree with them. If you agree, you stoke the fire of their delusions, but if you disagree, they won't be able to consider your opinions anyway since an ego-maniac already has all the answers. It's a lose-lose situation!

And so I delight in the intro to today's text; it informs us that Jesus told this parable to people who "trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt." It's an excellent piece of foreshadowing which let's us know that someone soon will be knocked off of his high horse! Yes! Don't we all enjoy seeing a big head get deflated? And, indeed, Jesus states that the Pharisee will be humbled.

The upright Pharisee – in today's terms we could imagine a pastor or maybe a politician – led a distinguished life in accordance with God's laws.

He tithed and fasted, and he was certainly thankful that he was not like others: thieves, rogues, adulterers or tax collectors. On the other hand, the tax collector, while beating himself, refused to even look up as he knew he was so sinful in the eyes of God. But Jesus declares that it is the tax collector who went to his home justified rather than the Pharisee.

The most obvious issue this parable is addressing is God's desire for humble hearts and God's distaste for self-righteousness, and to me, this is a something we Americans could stand to hear about and heed. So, I'd like to begin by taking some time to dissect what the words 'arrogance' and 'humility' represent. First, there is always an air of judgment surrounding someone who is arrogant. They believe that their ideas, their abilities and even they themselves are better or more valuable than we are. As a result, we are left feeling demeaned and unworthy. Arrogance and self-righteousness also incorporate entitlement. Many people in the US have cast aside God because we have lived the good life for too long and all our comforts and entertainment have blinded us from reality. We have grown to believe that all we have is because of our own efforts and our own hard work. We are gullible to think we are insulated from those issues other countries face – economic instability, corruption and environmental disaster – simply because we are members of the “most powerful nation on earth.”

Our greed orders our daily choices and the economy trumps all other political issues. We are so prideful that we even dare to sacrifice the very earth in exchange for cheap oil and other natural resources. We assert that our lifestyle and culture is the best and so we feel no need to adopt more healthy and just ways of living. We no longer acknowledge our blessings and that much of what we have or are has come from the bounty and grace of God. Anyone who has been around the block a few times knows that life change in an instant; Health, fortunes, livelihoods, our own very lives can be lost in the blink of an eye. Truly, everyday is a gift from God.

Arrogance and self-righteousness keep us so focused on our own accomplishments and desires that we are unable to care about anyone else's needs or perspectives. Perhaps another way of putting it is that when we are so completely wrapped up in ourselves, we leave no room for other ways of thinking, we have no room for anyone else and we have no room for God.

On the other hand, humility is an openness to other ideas, other people, and to the very presence of God. Some argue that humility should be associated with weakness since it involves compromise and vulnerability, but I would argue there is collective power in humility as other voices and contributions are made welcome. Humility is the way in which we make room for others; your own needs or abilities are not lesser than someone

else's, but you are able to welcome the gifts of others. These gifts then broaden our horizons, enrich our lives and help us to grow.

An extraordinary example of humility is the life of folk music legend, Pete Seeger. Have any of you seen *Pete Seeger: The Power of Song*? If you need a pick-me-up, watch this wonderful documentary. It follows the amazing life and accomplishments of this incredibly humble and down-to-earth musician and activist. He was involved with Civil Rights and environmentalism long before these issues sprouted movements! At 91, he remains a tireless force for peace and justice in the world. Interestingly though, Pete has always chose music as a way of uniting people and he has traveled the world collecting folk music – that is, the music of the people – from various cultures to share with all he meets. He never felt it was his purpose to convince everyone to have his same line of thinking, but he did think that bringing people together in singing songs of the peoples of the world was a way of contributing more love and hope into the world. Even when he was blacklisted as a communist, Pete never wished ill upon the many who wanted him silenced; he simply continued to put love, mercy and hope into action and song. Pete Seeger is indeed a hero of mine.

Ultimately, humility is a recognition that we are imperfect, incomplete and in need of the help of God and others in our life. Whereas self-

righteousness is a way of guarding one from his or her own faults, humility is an honesty about who we truly are and how we, therefore, remain open to God to be made better and more whole.

It's at this point that I'd now like to delve deeper into an additional element of this text, as this parable about humility also shines much light on the nature of our relationship with God. We often think that if we do everything right in our lives, we'll be rewarded with God's blessing. And by everything right, I mean not just obeying the rules but also doing really good things for others. But, today's parable teaches us that this is not how God works. The Pharisee did everything right, but it was the sinner who was exalted. So, what's up with that? Well, in short, this passage from Luke teaches us that God's grace is a gift that is freely given rather than something that we earn.

It was scripture passages like this that fueled the Reformation back in the 16th Century. Back in the day, we were told that our sins would have us burning in hell, and the only thing that could save us were our good works, our tithes and indulgences. But after reading parables like today's, the great reformer, Martin Luther, recognized that we are justified — that is when a sinner is made righteous — by faith alone through God's grace. Salvation is

a gift of God's grace which we attain through faith in Jesus Christ and not by our own efforts or works.

What a relief! What good news! What a joy it is to know that my sorry attempts at doing good, at loving my neighbors (and arrogant people), at giving away all of my possessions are not the key to my salvation! Let me get this straight: you are telling me I can now enjoy wasting my life away in front of the TV without any guilt, blissfully knowing that I am saved by God's grace through my faith in Jesus? Hmm. I guess I should acknowledge an important disclaimer. When we are given a gift, we often exclaim "thank you" and many times we give gifts in return. This should be our response to God's great gift of grace to us. When we are justified, we are led to lead a life of faith, hope and love. When the justified live in Christ and act in the grace we receive, we still strive to bring forth, in biblical terms, good fruit. So, we should never resign ourselves to complacency or give up trying to do good work this world. But, we need to remember that it is not these works that save us but rather it is God's gift of grace through our faith Jesus Christ.

Truly, we Protestants find it very freeing and a profound blessing to know that God's grace and love for us is so overwhelming that we are saved and made whole by nothing we do, but by our faith in Jesus Christ. In this

way, we know all might be redeemed and exalted in God's sight. Indeed, through his parable, Jesus explains that even the most sinful and broken can be recipients of God's grace. Even more encouraging is that God does not value our efforts with a score card, but rather through simple humility – by keeping ourselves honest and open to be faithful and open to God we can experience God molding us, and leading us to a life of wholeness.

In closing, although at the beginning of my sermon I admitted to delighting in seeing someone knocked off his high horse, I should have been smarter to know that Jesus never goes for payback or humiliation and he always ends up turning the tables on everyone. And isn't it wonderful? The final sentence of our text states that "all who exalt themselves will be humbled and all who humble themselves will be exalted." God is rewarding the humble but God is most certainly NOT punishing the exalted. To the contrary, God is humbling them so that they might be open again to God's grace and to God's presence in their lives. Because the truth is that we all need God in our lives, even heroes and the most successful of folks. A life without God and other people is vacant and meaningless at best. We all still have room to grow and to be shaped by God, no matter how old or experienced we are. So, brothers and sisters, let us humble ourselves so that

we MAKE ROOM for God to enter in to our lives, to work through us, and to keep reshaping and renewing us in hope and love. Hallelujah! Amen.