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PRIDE AND PREJUDICE

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Luke 18.9-17

Jesus told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt:

Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income to the temple.' But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!' I tell you, this tax collector went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.

People were bringing even infants to him that he might touch them; and when the disciples saw it, they sternly ordered them not to do it. But Jesus called for them and said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it."

One of the things Jesus did brilliantly in the Gospel accounts is turn society on its ear. With pithy statements and shocking stories he described life as Picasso might in a cubist painting where we are challenged to see the whole picture from different perspectives all on the same canvas at the same time. One feature is juxtaposed against another to force us to see things differently. Jesus turned life upside down by changing the rules of the game from the way the world would have it to the way God would have it.

On the canvas of a particular day, Luke tells us two stories of ordinary events that would not otherwise have drawn our eye but which become etched in our mind for the insight we gain in seeing life from a more gracious perspective. A Pharisee and a tax collector are offering prayers in the temple at the same time. Prayers in the temple are not unusual, of course, and the prayers that these two offered are not in and of themselves remarkable. What Jesus highlights in the center of the canvas of this painting is not the words but the attitude, and turns the expected outcome upside down.

While the Pharisee generally receives bad press in our day because of a false sense of piety, in Jesus's time a Pharisee was a well-respected leader. Pharisees busied themselves in all aspects of the spiritual life; they prayed often; they set the standard for spiritual mindfulness; they gave a significant amount of their money to the temple discretionary collection for the poor. Ordinary

people wished they could be a Pharisee, emulating their well-ordered and disciplined spiritual life, believing in all truth that if everyone could be a Pharisee, God's justice and order would reign. This would be the kingdom of God on earth.

Tax collectors were traitors. They were far more sinister than the IRS. They were fellow Jews in Rome's hip pocket, collecting taxes for the government and adding whatever they wanted to that amount to feather their own nests. They worked for the oppressor to further oppress their own people. Tax collectors were known to be greedy and materialistic, making it an outrage for this guy to even BE in the temple, let alone fancy himself worthy of praying to God. How dare he!

But God doesn't see things as we see them, Jesus tells us. It is shockingly blasphemous for this upstart Jesus to even suggest the possibility of such a scene as this, but then to add insult to injury, he pronounces the tax collector, in humbling himself before God, as the one justified and the godly Pharisee, in his pride and prejudice, as unworthy. The usual portrait of expectations gets chopped up and rearranged so that one doesn't know which is upside down and which right side up.

Jesus points out that it was the priggish pride of this Pharisee that fosters prejudice against another who is different, for as soon as we boast about not being like someone else, we automatically alienate ourselves from God who is eternally besotted with all his creation. The over-achiever tells God all that he has accomplished; the outcast merely pleads his unworthiness. God's response, according to Jesus, upends the value system by which most of us operate.

David Batstone, editor of *Sojourner's* magazine, received an email spewing profanity and vitriolic insults from a reader who, claiming to be Christian, was angry with one of the magazine's editorials on the Middle East. The email revealed a very sad rationalization for the boorish attack when the writer stated "I can write to you as I like, for you are not a human being. You have forfeited that right; you are pond scum."

"That's the theological loophole that sometimes passes as Christian morality these days," Batstone comments. "Simply demonstrate why the other person, or race of people, has forfeited their status as a human being and you can do with them what you will."* This is the evil mentality of Hitler: convince your armies that the people you want them to kill are not really people, but merely a label, a thing—a Jew, an old man, a homosexual, an invalid, a gypsy—and you justify your superiority and your God-ordained right to annihilate them.

It is why labels become instruments of hatred and evil. Knowing you by name, as a person in your own right, complicates my prejudice. But if I can package you up neatly and put you in a little cube labeled thief or drug addict, adulterer, tax swindler, Democrat, Republican, liberal, or conservative, I can put you in the painting of life where I want you—close to me or far away from me. Nelson DeMille in his novel *The Gold Coast* noted of one of the characters, that she "excludes any realities that upset her prejudice." The pride of prejudice feasts on the assumptions of class and category.

But Jesus paints a different picture, feeding our hope for the future in the joy that is found in the camaraderie of souls as stewards of all the people God has placed in the temple with us. At times we are Pharisees; at times we are tax collectors. But we come together in this place week after week, year after year, to practice humility, together, in the presence of a loving God. Unless we come like little children—innocent, adaptable, playful, caring—we can't know what God's kingdom is like.

When a young high school daughter came home one day asking to learn sign language, her mother wondered why the sudden interest. The girl explained that there was a new student in her classroom who couldn't hear or speak, and while others ignored him because he was different, she thought it better to learn his language to include and honor him.

The mother found a teacher of sign language and watched with delight as her daughter eagerly applied herself to a new language. And then, with pride, some years later, the mother watched from the front pew as her daughter signed "I Do" to the young man who stood beside her.

In her poem *A Word to the Elect*, Anne Brontë puts it this way:

*You may rejoice to think yourselves secure,
You may be grateful for the gift divine—
That grace unsought, which made your black hearts pure,
And fits your earth-born souls in Heaven to shine.
But is it sweet to look around and view
Thousands excluded from that happiness,
Which they deserve at least as much as you,
Their faults not greater nor their virtues less?*

When humility trades places with pride, and prejudice is replaced with acceptance; when the least are revered as the best and the most accomplished come as children, we can hope that we're going in a better direction. Together in the hope that we can curtail the prejudice of pride and eliminate the pride of prejudice we strive to paint, at least in our little cube of the picture, the world as God would have it. Amen.

--Rev. Gary L. McCann

*Quoted in a sermon entitled "*The Pride of Prejudice*" by D. Jay Loshier, Jr. First Presbyterian Church, Washington PA, as printed in Lectionary Homiletics online.