

Luke 18:9-14

Jesus also 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.' 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 man 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."

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On the Journey: Learning from the Red Sox

When are we entitled to hold other people in contempt? To reject them and scorn them?

According to Luke, Jesus told today's parable "to some who trusted in themselves...and regarded others with contempt."

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Whenever Jesus told a story, nothing was as you expected it.¹ The stories were odd enough that you went home and couldn't get them out of your head. You debated them among your friends: what was the point he was making? "It was this." "No, it was that!" You'd think you had it figured out, then you remembered another detail that seemed to shift the whole point. These parables were like puzzles, challenging to what you thought you'd always believed....

By 2013, though, we're pretty sure we've got the punch line of most parables clear. In today's lesson about the Pharisee and the tax collector, we're *know* we're being told to be humble and not haughty. Humble like the sinner, and not haughty like the imperious religious hypocrite. Of course! It's not as if any of us aspire to be an imperious religious hypocrite.

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But when the story was first told, Pharisees weren't known as religious hypocrites.²

¹ John Dominic Crossan, *The Power of Parable: How Fiction by Jesus Became Fiction about Jesus* (Harper Collins, 2012), pp. 89-93."

² Ibid.

Pharisees were admired by the Jewish people, no matter how much we vilify them in sermons today. Pharisees were leaders to whom the people felt close; they were the religious progressives. They kept the Jewish heritage alive when it could have been lost, in a time of Roman occupation. We might say they were like the Unitarian priests in Romania, who kept that faith alive during communism. The Pharisees were admired by those originally hearing the parable; they expected these good men to be *praised* by Jesus, and the tax collectors to be roundly excoriated for their flagrant injustices.

So what if we re-create the story with someone you admire deeply, and someone whose actions you know harm others, especially the most vulnerable....

In my dreams, you might say, for example, "A Unitarian minister and a drug dealer came into King's Chapel..."

In some parts of the country, we know the character set up for a fall would be "A northeastern liberal."

But perhaps for us, for this congregation, it'd be best if we said, "A progressive environmentalist and a Tea Party member come into the Congressional hearing room..."

Because why shouldn't an environmentalist today scorn the conservative who reads the bible literally, rejects science, and ignores global warming? Why shouldn't progressives give thanks to God that they are not hard-hearted Tea Party activists, bent on legislation that obliterates help for the poor and destitute?

To dig into today's parable – to let today's parable dig into you – to unsettle you— even upset you and your ways of thinking – we have to imagine that someone whom we admire deeply is going to be critiqued by Jesus. Maybe that *we're* going to be critiqued.

So we tense up, cross our arms over our chests, and wait, not so sure about what's going to be said next....

Why aren't we *entitled* to hold some other people in contempt?

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Because hang on. How *do* we tell how far along we are on our spiritual journey unless there is some kind of mile marker, some measure? How *do* we tell in life how we're faring without comparing ourselves to others? What's so bad about any of us looking around and seeing how we're doing, relative to others? It can't be completely irrelevant that we engage in spiritual practices – like praying, or charitable giving, the things about which the Pharisee was proud. They must have some value: otherwise, why do we do so much teaching on them – even us here at

King's Chapel, writing this week about tithing and the spiritual joy from giving money to the church...

In all parts of our life we make comparisons between people, and the information we net from these comparisons *is* valuable. This week The Boston Globe had a special section comparing the various strengths and weaknesses of Red Sox players and Cardinals. I found it helpful to review the batting averages, see the parts of the field to which players typically hit, check the records of the pitchers when they face right or left handers.

As savvy consumers, we compare and evaluate products all the time – from car safety ratings at Consumer Reports, to restaurant reviews by Zagats. With the advent of computers and web information, more and better comparisons are possible. We compile reliable movie reviews at the website “Rotten Tomatoes,” and we increasingly will be able to access health care information to compare different insurance plans -- once a few minor computer glitches are ironed out. Even with all massive battles over “Obamacare,” there is no debate that health “exchanges,” which provide more and accurate information to consumers, are better than a system where no comparisons can be made. Most of us would love to be able to do even more comparisons, were reliable data available – such as, which surgeons have the best outcomes on patients like me.

So Jesus, what's the problem with comparisons? With more information based on comparisons, don't we render more wise decisions? Why can't the Pharisee compare himself to the tax collector?

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Richard Rohr is a Franciscan priest who recently wrote Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life.³ I love *and* hate this book– love it because I keep recognizing profound truth within it, and hate it, because sometimes I can barely grasp why he thinks my ways of thinking are a problem. The book is like a good parable – it keeps me off balance, keeps unveiling how much spiritual growth remains ahead for me. For someone like me who gets satisfaction on a long road trip out of watching the mile markers pass by, seeing all the progress I've made, Falling Upward is like a huge green sign along the highway saying, Lots More Journey Ahead!! Darn! I want to be so much more spiritually accomplished by now!

Probably like the Pharisee...

But in Falling Upward, Richard Rohr actually *doesn't* argue against comparisons. Rather, he is convinced that the first half of our life, spiritually, must involve comparisons. Developmentally, it's how we move forward. We can't skip this part.

³ (Jossey-Bass, 2012). See especially pp. 1-4.

Rohr says that the three big concerns we must address at the beginning of our adult life are 1) What makes me significant? 2) How can I support myself? 3) Who will go with me? We need to become convinced as adults that we can survive in the world – that we can be successful in life, and adequately secure, before anything else is possible for us. We must see how we fit in this world, relative to others.

So we spend lots of energy – needfully – on figuring out our strengths and weaknesses, compared with others. “I may not really be the math genius I imagined myself in high school, but I have abilities with people I hadn’t fully realized.” Or, “I may be awkward around people, but I’m learning that I see complex problems in ways that others don’t seem to grasp.” “I keep being drawn to care for animals and people, and they seem to respond.” “I see color, I hear music in ways others appreciate, better than the average bear....”

And so we do compare ourselves to others a lot, and do tend to say, in the process, Thank God I’m not *that* way.... Because, says Rohr, we figure out our identities -- who we are as a persons – not only by saying who we ARE, but also by declaring, sometimes quite emphatically, who we ARE NOT. We want clear boundaries, like the four year old child’s insistence on wearing pink from head to toe to show she’s a girl and NOT a boy. In the first part of our lives, we must feel that we’re special, valuable in some way, so we clearly pronounce: I’m American, not foreign; I’m smart, as shown by these degrees; I belong with this sort of people, as shown by my church, my club, my clothes; I’m successful, as proven by these titles or possessions.... We tend, says Rohr, to be overly offensive and overly defensive, as if our markers for value are the only ones that matter. *I* stay home with my child instead of working. *I’m* a vegetarian.

“What do you do?” we ask, at this point in our adult lives. “Where is your child at school?” we inquire. “Where do you live these days....?”

Oh, Do you pray? Do you tithe? Do you fast? Well, I do....

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Blessedly, say Rohr *and Jesus*, there’s life beyond these things. Because at some point in life, after asking and answering all those questions over and over – about our accomplishments or failures - we ask this question: Is that all there is?

And then the second half of life’s journey can begin, when we can move from surviving to thriving.

Once we know with certainty that we can survive in this world, that we are valuable in some way, the next developmental steps can happen. If we don’t get the message that we are valuable from our parents when we are children, from the world when we are adults, or from God’s “gaze of love “upon us, then we keep cycling back to proving to ourselves that we can survive, that we have worth. If the first part of our

journey isn't complete, we can't get beyond surviving to thriving. We're stuck with comparing ourselves with others, still seeking validation and value.

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Ah, but once we see our intrinsic value, then all of those comparisons to other people start becoming meaningless, irrelevant. *And you're free!*

Now you ask poet Mary Oliver's question. Instead of wondering how you'll survive, you ask: Now what will I do with "my one, wild and wonderful life?"

You start to comprehend, a little at first, and then more and more, this paradoxical line from our prayerbook: Almighty God, in whose service lies perfect freedom....In whose service lies perfect freedom?

What?

In the second half of your spiritual life, you learn that you're *most free* when to the world you seem weakest – when you accept as reality that you fail and mess up. When you stop offering excuses to God, but still feel worthy to come before God in the temple of life. When you stop comparing yourself to anyone, and just choke out a cry for mercy – which is just a word for love and forgiveness intertwined. At that point, Jesus says in the parable, *you're* the model. You, the messed up tax collector!

Now you can't possibly feel contempt for another person. Because you know both your own failings, and you take the risk to imagine – though you never know for sure – how easily you could have been that other person who some scorn. You realize that if you'd served in Viet Nam, or your child had been in Afghanistan, if your family hadn't been around, if you hadn't been able to get that first job, if the economy had been worse when you finished school, *you* might have been the strident panhandler. You might have been the obnoxious, strutting employer. You might have been the faithless spouse. You might have even have had to stoop to take the Tax Collector job, too....

And even when you're *sure* others had lots of options, and just blatantly chose their despicable path, you still begin, more often than before, to have less an instinct to condemn, and more an instinct to wonder why they hold their point of view; to wonder what happened in their past that convinced them not to trust science and trust their pastor more; to wonder what makes us – me and you – so insistent on being right. What's at stake? Do you really *need* to despise that other person? Why?

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In the second half of the spiritual journey, says Richard Rohr, it's harder to offend us, because we're secure enough in who we are. In the second half of life, paradoxes make sense; we understand that truth often involves "both and." People's value in

the world isn't dependent of what they do – for good or ill – but just is. A person is valuable. Precious. A child of God. Like you. And you don't really need, or even want, to condemn her any more, to despise him, to scorn them.

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For some odd reason, the Red Sox have been on my mind! Many of us are trying to figure out how the Sox have risen in one year from absolutely last place to the World Series. Why this team has done so well with no real superstars but Big Papi. Why despite their youth, they seem so much more mature than teams of the last two seasons, which were filled with ostensibly bigger names. This team of mainly average players whose names are not well known.

We know that the team, like our city of Boston, was seared by the Marathon bombing six months ago. Like all tragedy, it put life into clear perspective. As a result, said player Jonny Gomes, this team understands “that they are grown men who get to play a child's game for a living.”

Knowing that they are men who get to play a “game” doesn't mean that these Red Sox don't play ball very seriously, and give it their all. It's clear that they all play their hearts out every single night.

What's fascinating – and key -- is that *because* they know baseball is just a game, it seems actually *easier* for them to work as hard as they do for the whole nine innings. Because they know that each of them is a decent player, but not a superstar, they support each other and have become a genuine team: all growing those shaggy beards, and having dinner together often, as a huge gang.

They *aren't* spending their energy complaining that they were unfairly slighted; they aren't ordering fried chicken to eat by themselves while other teammates are still sweating out the game; they aren't pointing the finger at everyone else as lesser than they, the cause of the team's woes. Don't you get the feeling that this year's Red Sox team members *wouldn't even think* about condemning each other?

I don't want to stretch this analogy too far, but consider this. When the Red Sox realize, with a deep maturity, that they are adult men who get to play a child's game, *then* they do their best, with the most joy and freedom; they don't just survive, they thrive. And when we realize that we get to live life, already loved by God – that we're essentially adults who get to play a child's game, who get to be children of God on this remarkable planet – then we are freed from all that negative energy of comparing ourselves to others, sniping over who gets the most media attention, the best locker, the highest salary. We're freed even from feeling superior based on our better batting average, which in our heart of hearts, we know will slump as we age.

We're adults who get to play the game! Who have the chance to give love and receive love. Because life is the gift of time enough to love.

When we realize this, then the paradox from the prayer book makes sense, too: in serving God is perfect freedom. We go out and do the best we can, with the gifts we have, like those Sox players. And we do it as a team, supporting each other, because we really wouldn't even think about condemning each other....We're past that, more mature now....

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And so, dear ones,

May we not strike out at others

nor balk at what is set before us.

But know ourselves already safe at home.⁴

⁴ Excerpt from a benediction shared with me by Amy Meyer, and used previously by Rev. Earl Holt, and Rev. Roger Cowan.