

True Religion

*Sermon preached by the Rev. Lynn C. Sanders, Associate Rector,
at the nine o'clock service, October 24, 2010: the Twenty-Second Sunday after Pentecost.
Based on Luke 18:9-14.*

Recently I met a friend at the Metropolitan Museum of Art to get tickets for a tour of the Big Bambú exhibit on the Roof Garden before it closes at the end of this month. Big Bambú is a giant structure being continually constructed from 5,000 bamboo poles lashed together with 50 miles of nylon rope. It's part sculpture, part architecture and part performance, with its continually evolving nature suggesting the complexity and energy of a living organism.

Big Bambú attracts me both from an art perspective and from an adventure perspective, so I was willing to stand in line for a while to get one of the coveted tickets. The line was already long when we arrived, and we settled in for what we thought was an hour's wait. As New York lines go, it was in the moderately hellish category. Though we were technically inside, cold gusts from the open doors blew in from outside, chilling the corridor where we had to wait. The corridor was low-ceilinged and entirely hard-surfaced, so voices echoed resoundingly, and there were a lot of voices. Because of the noise level, everyone spoke louder than usual in order to be heard, a predictably escalating cycle. Even as I semi-shouted to my friend, I was aware of—and irritated at—the woman in front of me speaking quite loudly into her cell phone, and the woman behind me speaking quite loudly into her cell phone while at the same time hitting me with her purse and shouting at her three rambunctious boys who were jostling others in line. I observed with admiration another woman just ahead of us who quietly read her book, seemingly unperturbed by the noise and chaos around her . . . until she removed her earplugs.

God, I thank you that I am not like that woman shouting into her cell phone, making us all

unwilling eavesdroppers on what I'm sure to hear is a fascinating conversation.

God, I thank you that I am not like this woman behind me who clearly has no sense of personal space and proper behavior and therefore hasn't taught her sons anything about that either.

"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."

"God, be merciful to me, a sinner."



According to Luke, Jesus tells this parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector "to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt." Whoever was hearing Jesus tell this parable would have recognized the Pharisee as a person to be looked up to, and the tax collector as an unsavory character. You could almost hear Jesus' audience cheer at "Pharisee" and hiss at "tax collector." Pharisees have negative connotation for us, because in the Gospels they're often portrayed in opposition to Jesus. But what church today wouldn't be thrilled to be filled with Pharisees? People who come to church all the time and pray a lot. People who don't steal or make negative headlines or cheat on their spouses or take financial advantage of others. People who give a tenth of ALL their income: salary, capital gains, inheritance, a tenth of everything, pre-tax. What church wouldn't want a congregation of Pharisees?!

Tax collectors, on the other hand, were a despised lot. They were Jewish, yet working for the Roman oppressors, and known for jacking

up tax rates and keeping a little something—or more—for themselves. We're not told how much the tax collector gives to the temple. It's possible he may give even more than a tenth of all his income.

Two people, one stereotypically “good,” the other stereotypically “bad.” Both have come up to the temple to pray, and in their prayers, more is revealed. Imagine both the Pharisee and the tax collector standing in the temple, in their different locations, each saying their prayers out loud, seen and heard by those around them. Their approaches are different. One offers thanks to God, and at the same time is contemptuous, setting himself apart from and above the other. One is clearly in anguish over whatever it is that he has done, begging—even ordering—God's mercy as he names himself a sinner.

We're told the anguished one, the self-identified sinner, goes home “justified,” that is, put back in right relationship with God. He is still a tax collector and a sinner, AND he is re-aligned with God. The justification, the re-alignment, is accomplished, not by the tax collector's actions, but by God. God has restored the relationship. But I think the tax collector's attitude, the orientation of his heart, helped make that possible.

If at this point we find ourselves thinking even a little bit, “God, I thank you that I am not like that Pharisee,” then this simple parable has done its work by holding up a mirror for us to see ourselves in, too.



The more I studied and reflected on this parable, the more I found it centering, for me, around the attitudes of contempt and humility. Contempt is defined as a lack of respect or reverence, and often includes regarding someone or something as inferior, of less worth. Contempt's cousins are scorn, disdain, even sarcasm.

Contempt, even if expressed silently or with great politeness, is dangerous in ways that I

can attest to from my own experience; perhaps you've experienced this, too. Feeling contempt for someone or something automatically puts up a barrier between us and them. In fact, it's one of the things that help to create an “us and them” in the first place. And make no mistake, contempt is hierarchical. In its simplest form, contempt is essentially an expression of superiority, often used to maintain some position of dominance.

We've likely all experienced contempt as expressed in the workplace, whether as an open putdown or a more casual discounting of a person or program, or more subtly with eye-rolling or witty quips at someone else's expense. Any workplace—whether for-profit, not-for-profit, or government—where contempt lives is hostile territory, and that can undermine the organization's functioning and the health of those who work there.

Contempt is corrosive in personal relationships as well. The psychologist John Gottman, known for his work on relationship analysis, particularly marital stability, has isolated one emotion that he considers the single most important sign that a marriage is in trouble: contempt. [Gottman's study is referenced in *Blink*, by Malcom Gladwell, 2005, pp 30-35.] Contempt doesn't have to be expressed openly for it to be hard at work rotting the foundations of one's relationship.

The tax collector prays, too, with an attitude of humility. Humility is not about putting yourself down or about being submissive. It's not making more of yourself, or less of yourself, than is warranted. Rather, it's about being honest with yourself about yourself, who you are, strengths and weaknesses all mixed together. Humility doesn't build a wall, but instead tends to dissolve the barriers that can get set up between us. At those times when I am able to see myself honestly and admit my own need for forgiveness, somehow that causes me to see others with more compassion and respect. Funny how that works. Humility is not just the opposite of contempt; humility can be an antidote for contempt.

As corrosive to our common life as contempt is, and as healing to our common life as humility

can be, this parable isn't just about contrasting contempt and humility. The knife-twist in this parable is how both contempt and humility are connected with prayer, with the practice of religion. The Pharisee's contempt even as he practices his religion, even in his praying, serves to cut him off from God and from others. The tax collector's honest anguish and humility does not cut him off from God, but instead opens him to receive God's grace and forgiveness, making it possible for him to be restored to relationship with God. Those who are merciful are able to receive mercy; those who forgive are able to receive forgiveness [Luke 6:36-38].

Remembering that the word “religion” is made of two parts: “*re*” meaning again, and “*ligio*,” the same root of our word “ligament,” meaning to bind. At its best, religion is supposed to bind us, and re-bind us to God and to each other. How does our own practice of religion, even our practice of prayer, draw us toward God or away from God, toward others or away from others?

Here we may find ourselves tempted to paint “religion” with one brush, or start to think of other religions as inferior to “ours.” But . . . we are not going there.

One of the most powerful promises we make as Christians and Episcopalians, and re-make every time we renew our Baptismal vows, is this: Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being? We answer, I will, with God's help. Important answer, because this promise is too big for any of us to manage on our own. Respect the dignity of every human being. I will, with God's help.

Here's my suggestion to you for this next week: Try living into that particular promise intentionally in this week ahead; make that your prayer, and see what happens. Does it separate you from God and others? Or does it connect you, does it re-bind you, to God and others?

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