

Holy Hypocrite! [Text - Luke 18:9-14]

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October 27, 2013

In this morning's New Testament reading, Jesus, the "subversive, trouble-making critic of ecclesiastical moralism" gives us some subversive surveillance on two people at prayer. One, is a respectable Pharisee; the other, a repugnant tax collector. Two people, in two different areas of the temple, praying to the One same God. However, according to a report from the NSA [the Nazarene Savior's Agency], the recorded transcripts of their prayers are *completely* different. Both individuals are equally candid in their praying - each one describing his own life situation as he sees it. Yet in the end, only one of them - the tax collector - goes home from the temple "justified".

It's evident that what is *justified*, isn't necessarily the tax collector's way of life, or way of making a living. Nor is it the Pharisee's way of life, or charitable giving, that's being criticized. We must remember that this is a *parable* - a story which, though not historically true, is told to reveal some profound truths. And Jesus is telling this parable "to those who trusted in themselves, that they were righteous, while regarding others with contempt." It seems, therefore, that one of the profound truths that Jesus seeks to reveal, is that people don't need to put-down other people, in order to build-up themselves. In other words, Life is *not* a competition! Life is a *gift* - a Divinely precious gift - given to each of us. And according to Jesus, we are *all* perfectly loved by the Creative Source who gives us this marvelous gift. Unfortunately, Life can become extremely tedious and turbulent when we forget this truth, and we try to justify ourselves before God and others, by comparing ourselves *to* others.

The Pharisee in Jesus' story is obviously driven by the need to feel superior - in fact, this is how his prayer begins: "God, I thank you that I am not like other people...! Then he goes on to list some of the other people that he is glad not to be like: "Thieves, rogues, adulterers, and certainly not like that tax collector over there!" The Pharisee doesn't even know this person, or his name. He simply pigeonholes him in the category of "tax collector", and immediately judges him as being morally inferior. That's a pretty harsh judgment, yet I think I understand why the Pharisee might do this.

Whenever people view Life as a competition, they will always be looking for someone who seems worse off than they are. "I may have my faults, but at least I'm not as bad as *him!*" And so they build themselves up by pulling or putting others down. Yet Jesus tells us that this is not the way you or I need to live our lives. Life is *not* a competition, and there's certainly no need to try to compete for God's love.

One of the great ironies that this parable reveals, is that quite often it is people's *religion* that lies at the root of their competitiveness. And so the very thing that it supposed to unite people, actually drives them apart. It's as if some people believe that the Omnipresent, Eternal Source of Life and Love isn't big enough to embrace us all. Therefore they feel that they must somehow compete for God's favor. And unless a person learns to let go of that kind of competitive, self-righteous religion, he or she will never be able to fully take hold of the wonderful abundance of Divine Compassion and Grace.

The Pharisee in Jesus' story is undoubtably a highly religious person. He's a tither, who gives one-tenth of all his income to charitable causes. [Which is certainly something worth striving for.] He also fasts two times a week - another excellent discipline. This Pharisee, like many of the Pharisees in Jesus' day, displays an outwardly upstanding life. However, this highly religious person, like so many other extremely religious people, is sorely lacking in his ability to trust in the Goodness of God. Genuine faith in God should allow people to not only trust completely in God's love for them, but also for others. It should help us realize that we don't have to prove ourselves as being acceptable to God, especially by pointing to others as being "unacceptable". Yet this is the danger of *any* religion that is not centered in the reality of Divine Love and Grace.

Unfortunately, there is a fair amount of violence, prejudice, and brutality that can be found in the writings of most religious traditions - including our own! And people who refuse to look at their Sacred Scriptures from an historic perspective, often have a hard time letting go of those violent and prejudicial images. So it's no wonder that strict, religious people will look around for others to condemn: "God, get them, not me! He's a tax collector, she's an adulterer, he's gay, she's a liberal-left-leaning-lesbian - from Lebanon no less! Please God, go after them, just don't clobber me!" Basically, it all boils down to how we understand and experience the One we call "God." If we truly believe that we must somehow appease and earn the favor of an angry and wrathful deity, it will naturally lead to a life of pious, self-defensive posturing. However, if you and I truly believe and trust that "God *is* Love" [I John 4:8], and that "God so loved the *world*...[John 3:16], we will be free to live our lives in ways that are open and honest, compassionate and caring.

"Two people went up to the temple to pray" - to plead their case before God. One of them tries extremely hard to show God just how good he is. He speaks very highly about his own personal accomplishments, all the while looking down with contempt on the lives of others. He basically tells God that he is proudly satisfied with his life. In fact, he makes such a good case for himself, that there's really nothing left for God to do for him. That man has so much religion, that he really doesn't need God's help! And so that Pharisee goes away empty-handed.

The other person, the tax collector, has nothing to brag about, and nothing to prove. He came to simply acknowledge his human frailty and failings, and to seek Divine forgiveness and mercy. He came not to proudly *tell* God, but to humbly *ask* God. Therefore, God can - and *does* - respond, with forgiveness and mercy, compassion and grace. And so this one goes back home, justified.

"For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted." Being humble in the presence of the Holy One doesn't mean we need to beat ourselves up, or put ourselves down. It simply means that we honestly acknowledge that we need help in order to live as authentic, loving, caring children of our Divine Creator. And just as most human parents will gladly help their children when asked, so our Heavenly Parent responds to you and me with the support and inspiration we need. So today, as you and I leave this place of worship, we can go home trusting that God has heard *our* prayers, as well as the prayers of all those gathered around us. After all, we don't need to compete for God's Compassionate Grace - there is plenty of *that* for us all!