

“Not Like Other People”

Luke 18:9-14

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

“Two people 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 person 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.”

Not Like Other People

Luke 18:9-14

October 23, 2022

Rev. Michael P. Catanzaro

I.

For sure, today's sermon will be a stretch; that is to say, tangential at the front end and a bit basic at the back. Hopefully, though, it will be a good stretch if not necessarily a long stretch and, in the midst of the baseball playoffs, perhaps a kind of seventh inning stretch we all need and deserve.

Owing to the fact every one in the congregation is aware that you keep me around because of Linda (that's right, I'm on to you) I will tell you that all is well with the Whos next-door in Whoville now that we have officially entered the "empty-nest" phase of our life in Canton; with just the two of us banging around in that big old house. Linda's absence from church last Sunday boded no dark clouds on the marriage horizon, she simply took the weekend to go visit our daughter, Nicole, and her husband, Chris, up in Maine; and had a fine time of it.

II.

Upon her return this past Monday Linda showed me the present I'm giving her for Christmas this year courtesy of the L.L. Bean Outlet, a Scottish thistle pin and chocolate bar gifted to her by Chris and Nicole from their recent honeymoon to England, Scotland and Iceland and, for me, a half-pint of chili sauce from a batch Nicole had whipped up after recently having requested my grandmother's recipe.

Now, as a general rule, I'm both a saver, and savorer, of things. I unwrap Christmas presents sloooowly, I buy new shoes when needed but leave them in the box in my closet and continue wearing the old pair for as long as I can, and I also stockpile special or specialty food items until that perfect occasion or honored guest arrives. As for that half-pint of chili sauce, though, well that was GONE in about 48 hours. Half on grilled cheese sandwiches for lunch Tuesday, and the rest on toast and eggs for breakfast Wednesday morning.

III.

I was really touched by Nicole's gift. First, there is the gift in and of itself: a homemade, labor of love from my daughter who knew the extent to which I would greatly appreciate as a tasty accompaniment to my food. Second, there are the thoughts, feelings and memories such a gift would evoke in me; all of which Nicole, undoubtedly, would be very much aware.

Now, when I was a kid sitting down for a meal (and it didn't matter which meal it may be, breakfast, lunch or dinner) inevitably each person would, in turn, ask to have the "chili" passed to them to put on just about *anything* and *everything*. Or, if using the full title, you'd always say, "chill-*a*-sauce"; never "chili sauce." Why, I don't know; that's just how it is.

My guess is most of you have no idea what constitutes "chill-*a*-sauce" so here is a quick run-down of ingredients: tomatoes, onions, hot peppers, vinegar, green and red sweet peppers, sugar, salt, cinnamon, all-spice and gloves. All of which are cooked down for 3 or 4 hours.

IV.

Tuesday afternoon, as the grilled cheese was cooking in the frying pan, I opened the jar and heated half in the microwave. Smelling the distinctive sweet and savory aroma I was immediately whisked back to my grandmother's kitchen, with multiple pots simmering on the stove. Though no one in my family belongs to Mensa, we were all smart enough to know to stop in at Gram's house whenever she was making chill-*a*-sauce; typically late August or early September when the tomatoes and peppers came in. She would toast some bread, slather it with butter, and ladle on a generous portion of chili fresh from the pot. There is no better taste in the world, then or now; though this week's grilled cheese and scrambled eggs came in as a close second. I will also say that Nicole's chill-*a*-sauce was *excellent*, and on a par with my grandmother's; no small feat.

V.

Now, I hesitate to tell you this next part because I know Nicole reads the sermons and I don't want her to take what I'm about to say as any form of criticism, but not once in all those years did I *ever* see my Gram can a *half*-pint of chill-*a*-sauce. It was always pints and quarts, and lots of them. We

might have run out of milk, bread, eggs or ketchup, but not once in all my life do I ever remember getting to spring, or even the following summer, and run out of chill-a-sauce.

Which got me thinking, just how much *did* she can every year? My initial guess was 80 pints but that seemed low to me, so I texted my brother Paul who actually does a lot of canning at his Mother Earth News homestead, and he reminded me Gram also did a batch for of our uncles, Bud and Jimmy. After doing some refiguring and hard thinking we decided she would do anywhere from 150 to 200 pints...every year. That's *a lot* of chill-a-sauce.

VI.

Though I certainly appreciate my family and my up-bringing, the fact is we are no Mayflower descendants, no one has gone on to achieve any great fame or fortune, there is nobody in the family tree who is particularly noteworthy, remarkable or fascinating. While *most* of us are hard-working and community-minded, we are more akin to peasant stock; as Wanda Renick likes to say of herself.

What sets us apart, though, what makes us not like other people is the chill-a-sauce. Which, admittedly, is a differentiation of some humbleness. Which brings us to today's scripture reading from Luke 18, and a story I would like us to stand on its head.

VII.

Here, we are told, Jesus is speaking to an audience consisting of those who trusted in themselves that *they* were righteous and regarded *others* with contempt. As was his penchant to do, Jesus tells them a parable. In this instance, one about a tax-collector and a Pharisee who go up to the temple to pray; the former being uniformly despised, the latter a religious leader of great respect and standing.

The Pharisee offers a prayer thanking God that he is not like *other* people, thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even this tax collector standing nearby. The Pharisee recounts his piousness in fasting twice a week and giving a tenth of his income (a tithe) to the temple. The tax collector, in contrast, would not even look up to heaven but, instead, was beating his breast and praying, "God, be merciful to me, a *sinner!*"

VIII.

At the end of the parable, Jesus makes a bold and counter-intuitive claim: that this person, the tax collector, went down to his home justified rather than the other, the Pharisee. Jesus says, “For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.” This past week Linda and I went out to dinner with another couple from our church, slightly ahead of us in their life trajectory having recently retired. After a delicious meal laced with delightful and engaging conversation, I shared with them a recent realization I have had and find myself often repeating of late.

I began today’s sermon by pulling back the curtain on why you keep me around. That is, if I go Linda goes. Which, while being said tongue-in-cheek, we all know to be absolutely the truth. However, this begs another question. Namely, why do I (and Linda) stick around? More to the point, after 25 years, why are we looking to stick around even longer (if you’ll have us)?

IX.

Certainly, part of the answer is both Linda and I have come to love you. *Each* of you has grown very dear to us. As I shared at this past week’s dinner out, there is not one person in the congregation I’m not *genuinely* happy to see.

While that may be a valid social and pastoral reason to stay here, it is the *theological* reason which is really the more profound: your humility. It is your humility that makes you *not* like other people and differentiates you as a congregation. So, at the end of the day, it is your *humility* that keeps me (and Linda) here at the Church on the Park. This, I can well imagine, may come as something of a surprise to you. Not a surprise as in shocking but, rather, a surprise as in “*Huh?!?*”

X.

Admittedly, humility is a fairly basic concept. However, if you’ll excuse the wordplay, it isn’t just about abasement. Yes, we have all been humbled, either by circumstances or by other people and, frankly, it isn’t very much fun and not something we would ever wish for ourselves. The typical response to being humbled is that of thankfulness; either that it has passed or that we are not now being made to experience it again.

A deeper response to being humbled, though, is *honesty*. Honesty about one's life and honesty in remembering what it feels like to have humility thrust upon us. Having an awareness of our own humility, such that we are able to understand ourselves (like the tax collector in today's parable) to be sinners through and through, opens the door to a depth of compassion and non-judgmentalism toward those who are standing nearby to us. Those with whom we share our lives and these sanctuary pews.

XI.

In today's parable, Jesus is *not* calling for us to abase ourselves. Instead, Jesus simply wants us to remember and be honest with ourselves about what it feels like to be humbled such that when we see others being made to take *their* turn at bat there is compassion, acceptance and an absence of judgment. Knowing full well that *our* turn will come again, eventually.

That said, and to be fair, you don't need to be part of this church, or any church, to come to possess humility as a *quality* of one's life or to have compassion towards the lives of others. Many people walk around with their own half-pint of humility; no small feat.

However, when it comes to all of you, to this church and its congregation, it is a matter not just of quality but of *quantity* as well and in particular. The humility of this congregation, taken together, never ceases to amaze me if only in the seeming endless supply. Like my Gram's chill-a-sauce, produced in such quantity it never runs out.

XII.

This is what I see in *each* of you and, taken together, in all of us a church; a quality and quantity of humility, which comes from stretching spiritually to be ever more honest *with* ourselves and *about* ourselves such that all which remains is a joy in discovering ourselves to be the Children of God we've been created to be; and, wow, that is a whole lot of fun.

If you wish to see the truth of Jesus' words from today's parable, look no further than the congregation to which you belong. For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted. Amen.