

“Who Are You Looking At?”

Rev. John Allen

Some of you may remember a few years ago I did a sermon series about the parables of Jesus. These little imagined stories that Jesus tells. And clearly his preferred way of teaching.

One thing that became clear as we spent time with many of Jesus' parables is that most had a simple, surface-level, meaning, as well as a much deeper current. Kind of a rhetorical undertow that can take you by surprise.

It is the beauty of these parables. They are not simple allegories, with straightforward teachings. They are like prisms that catch the light in different ways as you turn them over, and around.

And so it is with this parable.

First, the simple reading.

The Pharisee, a man obedient to God, devoted to prayer, and by every count a Holy man living life the right way. Yet his prayer is haughty, he is not humble. “Thank you God, that I am not like *those people*,” he says looking at the crowd of ordinary sinners moving around him.

Compare him to the tax-collector. Probably the most despised member of society. A man who would enrich himself through extortion on behalf of a hated empire. A living, breathing, reminder that the people were under Rome’s rule. And the one who would come to take what had been their’s in order to feed the very soldiers that occupied their land.

And yet, his prayer is humble and contrite. “God have mercy on me, a sinner.”

So at first look it seems simple, what Jesus is teaching here. “Be humble.”

And that is not the wrong takeaway, and it is a good lesson to be sure.

But it is not the only thing going on here.

—

When I was a second year Seminary student, I won an award. The Hudnut Preaching Prize, given by my school each year to the second-year student who showed great promise in the ministry of preaching. This was the only award given to second-year students, rather than graduating students, because year 2 was when we studied preaching, so we were all fresh in the minds of the preaching faculty who conferred that award.

I won't lie, I had hoped to win. Many people I admired greatly had received the award before me. And I was very proud to have been recognized.

The following year, at my graduation ceremony, I received two awards. By the time I got called up on stage for the second one, I was feeling embarrassed by why truly felt to me like an undeserved volume of praise and recognition.

But I won't lie. It also felt good. I enjoyed it. I felt proud.

But then things took a turn. It came time to present the Hudnut Preaching Prize. Given, as they announced, to the second-year student who showed great promise in the ministry of preaching.

And then they called my name. And read the exact words they had read the year before.

It was a simple copy and paste mistake. Somewhere along the line the document had not been updated with the new information about who won that year. The person presenting the awards was a guest, not a regular part of the community, and was oblivious to the mistake, even as it was obvious to everyone else.

And called my name again and again. And she knew who I was, because I had been up on the stage moments before. She was looking at me, calling my name. And so, I panicked, and to keep things moving I walked on stage, with a knowing glance to my classmates, and shook her hand.

A few days later, Molli and I were out on a date at a restaurant. A few tables away, a small group of friends was having dinner together. They were far enough away that they would have never noticed that I was in the restaurant. But they were close enough that when I heard my name, my ears perked up.

And I found it nearly impossible to tune out their lengthy conversations with each other about me. About the extent to which they felt my presence loomed too large at the graduation ceremony. Their irritation about the mistake that brought me undeservedly back up on stage, and sidelined the rightful honoree. And then they went a

bit wider with it, talking about all the reasons why they felt I did not deserve any of these awards anyway.

Its the only bad date I ever remember having with Molli.

That experience gave just enough of a nudge of confirmation to that relentless voice that each of us has inside that insists we are a fraud, and if people only knew...

I recovered my footing in the hours that followed with a comforting thought. It wasn't really about me. Sure, there was some truth in what they had to say. And I understand the frustration of seeing me on the stage a third time to re-hash last year's award. But it wasn't my fault.

And who knows what myriad of other frustrations I was representing for them in that moment. Who knows who I was reminding them of. It was just the momentary opinion of a small group of people, all with their own motivations and flaws.

That was comforting thought for about 15 seconds.

Until I realized what it meant about my awards.

Because, honestly, they weren't really about me either. Sure there was something real behind them, I had good grades. But in the end, those awards just represented the momentary opinion of a small group of people, of people, all with their own motivations and flaws.

Who knows what I was representing for them. Who knows who I was reminding them of.

In that moment I confronted how profoundly my sense of my self, and my own value, was built on the uncertain ground of other people's opinions. It was startling to realize how I could be taken so high, and then so low, solely on the wings of other people's opinions.

—

The pharisee and the tax-collector. Their prayers were not only distinct only in their humility.

They were different in terms of who they were looking at.

The Pharisee, its all about me, and them.

“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.”

His whole sense of his value is built on what he does and how he compares to everyone else.

The tax-collector. Its all about God.

“God, be merciful to me, a sinner!”

The tax-collector, in his prayer for God's mercy seems to recognize the one thing that the Pharisee has missed.

Its not about him. It is not about what he has done or left undone. It is not about his fasting or tithing, or his work. It is not about how he compares to the people around him.

He knows that, in the end, he is dependent on God. There is no way he could earn God's love, and neither could he forfeit it.

Here is that undertow in the parable, because the Pharisee is actually right about the sort of life he is supposed to live. His mistake is believing that he is the source of his own blessings.

And the tax-collector we assume will return to his work of extortion on behalf of the empire. His virtue is that he turns to God as the sole measure of his human worth.

Looking to other people is a volatile way to order our lives. If we rise and fall by how we compare to other people, by our reputation, and our deeds. We will likely oscillate between thinking far too much of ourselves, and far too little.

What will happen to that Pharisee the day he — in a moment of weakness— becomes a thief or an adulterer? What will his prayer be if he fasts only one day, some week. Or is only able to give away 7% of his income.

If looking to each other people is a volatile way to order our lives. Learning to derive our sense of value and worth from God offers a more even ride. For if we remember each day that God loves us, and that everyday we live and act in ways that are unbecoming of one who has been given the gift of such grace. That is a pretty sturdy ballast for our self image, that keeps us from going too high, or too low.

Humility is that middle ground between self-deprecation and self-congratulation. It is allowing our self-image to be grounded in the truth of who we are. People who mess up all the time, whom God loves.

So that simple surface reading actually lays a trap. Because without this deeper look, we read the parable and then say: “Thank God / am not as self-righteous like *that* guy.”

When what we really should pray, with every confidence in God’s steadfast love, is simply this.

“God, have mercy on me.”

