

“Two Men Walked into a Church . . .”

Luke 18:9-14

Sermon by Jan Edmiston

October 24, 2004

Maybe you've heard this one.

A priest, a rabbi, and an imam walk into a bar. And the bartender says, “What *is* this? A joke?”

Our scripture lesson for this morning is not a joke, but it sounds a bit like one: a Pharisee and a tax collector walk into a temple . . .

Actually this story – like last week’s story – is another parable. A parable is not something that literally happened, but Jesus told parables in order to jolt his listeners and teach them something about God and God’s kingdom.

Some *jokes* jolt us too. They offer a little twist. They involve a little bit of thinking. Some jokes even make us angry.

The parables of Jesus made many people angry because they called into question the behavior and piety that most people considered acceptable in those days. The way *Jesus* tells it, that piety has become a cartoon, a joke.

Two men walk into the temple, and one is clearly better than the other. *Everyone could see that!*

One is a Pharisee – respectable, highly esteemed, clearly *very spiritual*. If there is a check list for proper Jewish spirituality, this man can check off each practice:

Fasting? Check. (Mondays and Thursdays were the suggested days to fast.)

Giving away ten percent of your income to the temple? Check. (And apparently he was happy to tell people of his generous offering.)

The other man in this parable is a tax collector – about as likely to be your friend as an IRS auditor, only much worse. First century tax collectors were reviled. They were Jews, but they worked for the Romans, and so other Jews considered them to be traitors. They were the drug-dealers of the first century – smarmy and disreputable.

While collecting money for the Romans, they notoriously harassed poor Jews who struggled to pay their taxes. And then they would skim a little off the top.

But *this* tax collector had a sense of his miserable ways. He had no excuses. He bore no pride in his work. In prayer, he couldn’t even look at God. Instead, he beat his chest and simply prayed, “Have mercy on me, a sinner.”

Both men had gone *up* to the temple to pray because the temple in Jerusalem was on a hill – Mount Zion, they called it. But only one of the men could be called “down to earth.”

The truth is that – while the confessing tax collector bowed his head and prayed for mercy before God – the Pharisee prayed with his head held high – looking down on others like the tax collector. ***“God, I thank you that I’m not like these others, these rogues, these thieves, these adulterers, these . . . tax collectors!”***

The **joke** is - the **jolt** is - that – in spite of the Pharisee’s piety – it was the tax collector who was justified that day. And here is where Jesus delivers the punch line:

*All who exalt themselves will be humbled,
but all who humble themselves will be exalted.*

In other words, if we are more *down to earth* in our faith, it is more likely that *we will be lifted up* into heaven. The God we worship came down to earth himself in order to lift us up with him.

How does one live a “down to earth” faith? By modeling the One who came “down to earth” for us.

Two men walk into a bar on Capitol Hill. One is wearing his White House security badge. One is not. The first White House staffer is talking about how busy he is, how important he is, who he is having lunch with tomorrow. The other guy notices a person in the corner who looks like he’s had a rough day. The second White House staffer and the stranger talk. Or maybe they don’t talk. The point is that the second guy notices someone that the first guy considers invisible.

Two women walk into a homeless shelter, neither of them homeless. They are there to help with a church commitment. One sets up dinner, barely able to look the residents in the eye. “Thank God, I’m not like these miserable losers, living like a refugee in this hole in the wall.” She leaves feeling proud of her good deed for the day.

The other woman sets up dinner, striking up a conversation with a young girl who lives there. She looks her in the eye. She listens to what she has to say. She sees the girl as her equal, her sister in Christ. “Thank you God for this new friend,” she prays to herself, realizing that but for the grace of God, she could be living in this shelter. She leaves feeling grateful for her many blessings.

Do we see the difference? The God who came **down** to save us is not interested in whether or not we can **lord ourselves** over other people. Life is ephemeral, and when

this life is over, God is not going to care what kind of car we drove or what kind of clothes we wore. God is not going to care whether we worked on Capitol Hill or in Capitol Heights. There is nothing inherently holy or unholy about ranks or titles or things.

What matters is how we see *ourselves* and how we see *others*.

Do we exalt ourselves and look down on others in contempt?

Or do we model Jesus Christ who, *though he was God*, came down to earth to mix and meet sinners just like us? Rogues and thieves and adulterers and tax collectors? Alcoholics and liars and pornography addicts and fornicators and tax evaders and people who barely share 2% of what we have with others (much less 10%).

Do we pray with our eyes on other people, hoping that they are over there confessing how selfish and controlling they've been? Or do we pray with our eyes cast down, acknowledging that *we* are the ones who need to change?

All who exalt themselves will be humbled.

And the humble will be exalted.

I close with a final story.

A rabbi, a priest, and an imam get into a three-car accident. All three cars are totally demolished, but amazingly none of the holy men are hurt. After they each crawl out of their cars, they see that all three of them are clerics. Each is wearing the clothing of his faith. And so they try to outdo each other in terms of holy caregiving and attention. "Father, Rabbi – how are you? Were you hurt?" said the imam.

"How amazing that we would all be men of faith," said the rabbi. "Our cars are totaled but we are not hurt. This must be a sign from God."

"Yes, this must mean that we are meant to be friends," said the imam.

"Yes," said the priest. "God must want us to come together and bring our communities together in peace. And look!" the priest continued. "Another miracle! The bottle of wine I was taking to the bishop didn't break. Surely God wants us to drink this wine together and celebrate our good fortune. Even you, Imam. Surely God wants all three of us to celebrate our newfound union."

And he took the bottle and opened it and handed it to the imam and the rabbi who each took a swig. When they handed the bottle back to the priest, he placed the cork back into the bottle and set it down.

"Aren't you having any?" asked the rabbi and the imam. "No, I think I'll wait for the police," the priest said.

Who are we really looking out for? God knows the true answer to this question.

Jesus came down to earth so that we might be lifted up. If we spend our lives lifting up only ourselves, I'm afraid that the joke will be on us.

Let us pray:

High and holy God, you are the One who sees us as we truly are. You are the One who knows our deepest intentions, our greatest hopes, our truest devotion. Have mercy upon us, for we are sinners who focus first on ourselves. Grant us a clear awareness of how we must change. Give us a sincere desire to become one with the poorest among us. And make us into the likeness of Christ who came down to earth that we might be lifted up. We pray this in his holy name. Amen.