

Twentieth Sunday After Pentecost

23.10.2022
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Introduction

It is almost as if the writer of the gospel text for today knew something about human nature which we in the age of social media find very hard to grasp. This reading is about othering, comparing, judging, using the condition of others to improve our own or others view of ourselves.

Jesus tells a story without a positive lead, instead two characters whose jobs or roles would normally be seen as in opposition to the way of faith are introduced as a contrast for each other.

Read it through (perhaps aloud) and put 'labels' which you might perceive to be in opposition to each other in the place of 'Pharisee' and 'tax collector'. Say, for example, 'liberal' and 'evangelical', but any labels, political or personal, would do. Then read it again but switch the labels round. How does the story read? What makes it different when a label with which you identify is in the 'Pharisee' role? Is it more comfortable to have labels you would use of yourself in the 'tax collector' role?

Do you identify with no labels at all?
Why is that important?

Text

Luke 18:9-14

He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: "Two men 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 man 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."

One challenge for the churches of today, which we have struggled to resolve for a generation, is the use of labels for theological viewpoints that may be applied to ourselves or others in ways that are divisive and unhelpful. In the Church of Scotland, our decline as a denomination has made it harder to unpick these labels as they became polarised by the 'union and readjustment' system. Essentially, a process of closing and uniting churches to try to cover the whole area of Scotland with parish ministers within the budget limitations and the recruitment struggles over the last 40 years. This process has encouraged congregations to find arguments to retain their full-status ministry rather than to provide evidence to prove they were self-sufficient or growing. If one charge considers itself 'evangelical' and a neighbouring charge considers itself 'liberal' these labels have been used (and often accepted) as a reason why these two congregations of Christians cannot unite. In order to serve these charges, we have trained groups of self-identified 'evangelical' or 'liberal' ministers, who meet in conferences, or share ideas online, excluding the other group. In a declining church there is a tempting security in group identity. If we place the terms 'liberal' and 'evangelical' into the reading for today, how do we feel about those labels, are they intrinsic to our faith? Or is our penitence or arrogance the key factor as Jesus' story suggests?

Is it our role to take our own or our colleagues' identities away? Are the labels themselves the problem, or is it the judging and 'othering' through labels which does not help? Are humans capable of using labels without negative judgment? Clearly in the Church of Scotland, and I am sure this is applicable to other denominations too – we have a range of views, traditions, theologies and ideas all of which are set within our shared values. Could this width of faith be a point of pride?

These differences of view must be the components of robust discussion in our meetings and planning without creating two separate churches within the church. When we come to a time of conflict, or a division of limited resources, the labels can come to the fore as we try to point to others and say with the Pharisee 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people'.

I wonder about Jesus choice of a Pharisee as a character for this story. They were wealthy, respected, leaders in the community. The Pharisees were intellectuals, and we know from the story of Nicodemus, that the thoughtful and humble Pharisee did exist. Yet the cartoon Pharisee was the 'whitewashed tomb' all white and shiny on the outside but rotten on the inside. Jesus was using the 'label' of Pharisee to make a point about religious observation without humility, without empathy, without the humility required for a journey of faith.

Label-driven conflict can range across various spectrums from public/private, large scale/small scale, internal/external, and crop up when we're not just considering big public issues but in inter-personal differences which have the capacity, if unchecked, to eat a church community from the inside out. As soon as we come to frame up our unique identity as an 'over-and-above' identity we lose one of the key elements of the Christian path, humility. For a denomination such as my own, founded on radical ideas of equality, it may seem even more regrettable that these labels have become embedded in the identity of ministers and members alike.

Complicated as these conflicts are when we add in two more labels, or identities: 'victim' and 'oppressor' we find a new complexity to our reading of the story. Is there a difference if a Victim prays, 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people' to the same words coming from the mouth of an Oppressor? Who decides the labels? And, following Eric Berne, these labels may switch during a conflict, or inside our own heads. Maintaining the path of humility in a conflict may well include a personal self-reflection on who might be seen to be a victim of the behaviour of others, and who might be seen to be behaving in a bullying or oppressive manner. Is it likely that this will have a direct and binary answer? A

'goodie' and a 'baddie' – or as in Jesus tale, do we all start from a compromised position whatever we say to the contrary?

There are key issues where the 'labelling' of Christians becomes toxic, I am sure you can think of many, for me, one would be same-sex relationships, another abortion, another the definition of a 'Christian'. These are deeply human, personal and emotionally sensitive issues, and there are many more. The desire to protect ourselves as we discuss these issues with those who disagree with our position may quickly formulate as the cry:

'God, I thank you that I am not like other people.'

What then, if we turn our attention to the tax collector? If we think of the role of 'tax-collector' as a label, what did that label say? A watchword for a cheat, someone who collaborates with the enemy, who would cut a profit on the side, who would pressure people for their money. It was a disliked and reviled role in first century Palestine. The words on the tax collector's lips are:

'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!'

Do we find it easy, in the context of our own conflicts, to say these words with the tax collector? Is self-justification not an easier route than humble abasement? Are we not taught, in 21st century moral standards, that confidence and self-assertion are good things? Particularly when we come to those issues which bite at the soul? How do these words sound in our own ears:

'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!'

Response

This week's text has led me to do a lot of thinking. Perhaps it would be good as a response to do something physical and mindful, rather than to over-think the conflicts which may have been triggered by the comment on the text above. A bad memory, after all, only exists while we are remembering it.

In response to this text, why not take a walk in the woods, or to a favourite park or place. Look at the surroundings, the buildings or plants, the sky. Spend time just being in the space in which you inhabit.

If you would like a few pointer questions to take on your walk with you, how about trying a few of these?

What does humility mean in the context of your life, right now?

Where can you, personally, be humble and find peace?

Is there exaltation in humility?

How does it feel?

In what way is it different to or the same as the feelings of both the Pharisee or the tax collector in the text for today?

Prayer

'for all who exalt themselves will be humbled,
but all who humble themselves will be exalted'

God of the humble,
catch me when I fall into using my humility:
as a judgement over others;
as a way to treat another human soul
as if I knew them to be less humble than me;
as if I were winning the 'humble-game'.
Grant to me true humility,
so that I may be exalted, in true faith,
free of labels,
free of identifiers which put me in opposition to others,
free of any judgement which places me over others,
and instead, be myself before you,
wholly loved and forgiven,
redeemed and restored.

Amen