



“Humbled Before God”

a sermon by

Kathleen A. Crowe

First Presbyterian Church
Charlotte, North Carolina

March 16, 2005

Some of you may be breathing a sigh of relief that this week is our final week of discussing Spiritual disciplines. I truly hope this series hasn't been too painful but has rather afforded a bit of an opportunity to call a halt to business as usual and celebrate a few basic tools for drawing closer to God in the Lenten season, to truly prepare our hearts for the gravity of the crucifixion of our Savior, his death, and heighten the celebration of his resurrection on Easter Sunday. This final discipline we will take up offers a message we are all quite familiar with. It is practiced each week in worship - is built into the liturgy every Sunday morning because it would be impossible to understate its significance in our Christian worship and our lives of discipleship and yet it is startling in its simplicity. But it is the custom of Lent to give pause and recall again those most basic disciplines of our faith as the building blocks of our life in Christ, and so this is the final but also most straightforward sermon on a discipline you will hear from me, but it is in an honest, simple, and straightforward way that we prepare our hearts for the road to Jerusalem.

I am speaking of the discipline of confession and we will hear Christ's take on it today in the gospel of Luke, chapter 18:9-14, in a parable that comes in the midst of several parables on prayer and right living, and before Jesus encourages the disciples to bring the children of the crowds to him to bless them. "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."

If you are like me, you may breathe a bit of a sigh of relief when you hear this passage. We are all familiar with the roles the Pharisee and the tax collector play here - and we are all quick to identify ourselves with the one and not the other when considering the proper posture we are to take before God in prayer. Like we discussed last week the 'least of these' in this story seem easily identifiable. The Pharisee is, after all, the moral of just about every Sunday School story about how not to behave - moralistic, self-righteous. These were the guys that deliberately fasted in the middle of the market on the busiest shopping days of the week so that everyone could see how pious and holy they were. Nothing like any of us, of course. And the tax collector - well, these were the ones Jesus ate with, the fallen sinners like you and me, and so when the time comes for Jesus to share a glimpse of insight into the depths of an act of faith as great as confession, the characters he chooses to illustrate his point assume roles to which we are accustomed.

But look at this parable through a first-century lens, and the moral to this story becomes shocking - even scandalous. Imagine your senior minister, or a good judge or professor. Perhaps your grandmother. Place any of these in the shoes of the Pharisee. This person was the plumb line for the religious life of the community, a teacher in Sunday School and beyond, and a leader to be emulated - who never missed a temple sacrifice, tithed his share to pay the salaries of the pastors, contributed to the building campaign, and turned out on church work days. This was the 'go to' guy for spiritual direction as the one who was the most biblically and theologically literate figure in town and was called in to assist those poor souls who had wandered astray from the law and the covenant.

And then there was the tax collector. Luke's Jesus frequently gives attributes to the characters of his parables that are completely the opposite of what one in his time might expect them to possess and this story is no exception - with the tax collector, of all people, being the model of faithful behavior. His trade was to take money from those who had none to give, and offer it up as sacrifice to corrupt city officials and officers. The Roman government gave the tax collectors a far greater power than they really ought to have possessed and they were never slow to use the advantage for their own profit or for the belittlement of the poor. They often did vile things to get their money, and so were hated and feared. Probably half of all he had, was stolen from the abuses of his power, and he therefore owed a terrific debt to his society which he would likely never make good on. It was not often that this tax collector darkened the steps of the temple; the priests very seldom saw him coming with a sacrifice, it would have been an abomination from someone so ritually unclean. He came to temple usually only when he needed something. He was the guy who always had his hand out and wasn't very well versed in the ways of propriety in the church. His language, dress, attitude, behavior - all of it would have been offensive on a Sunday morning, and so it was really much better and more comfortable for everyone that he just never came. Let that soak in for just a moment even, and we see just how absurd it really is that we should be so quick to wish to identify ourselves with the tax collector here. And yet absurdity was exactly what Jesus was going for. Because nothing short of such an absurdity as the dregs of society walking away justified before God instead of a holy man would drive home Jesus' point that in the eyes of God there is no such thing as merit. And in the realm of confession, to be truly humbled before God is to come claiming nothing for our own except our sinfulness and pleading that before the throne, "God be merciful to me a sinner."

The story is told that Frederick the Great, king of Prussia, once visited a prison and talked with each of the inmates. There were endless tales of innocence, of misunderstood motives, and of exploitation. Finally the king stopped at the cell of a convict who remained silent. "Well," remarked Frederick, "I suppose you are an innocent victim, too?" "No, sir, I'm not," replied the man. "I'm guilty, and I deserve my punishment." Turning to the warden, the king said "Here! Release this rascal before he corrupts all the fine, innocent people in this place!" Despite our guilt and our deserving of punishment, confession releases the power of truth, and the truth sets us free. How tempting it is to stride unflinchingly up the steps of self-reflection like the Pharisee, secure that what we will find there really isn't so bad after all, to offer half-hearted confessions confident that God knows that we are really doing all right. To take comfort in all the things we know we are doing well. To offer justifications and excuses to God. Reasons for why we did not act as we should or could. To ease our consciences by comparing our sins over and against the sins of others. To try and dazzle God with the cheap trinkets of our virtue rather than donning the rags of a sinner, to try and make ourselves out to be better than we are before God and others by casting a long sideways glance to the likes of ones such as the tax collector. But the fact is that God actually knows that we are really sinful.

And by exemplifying the tax collector, Christ illustrates the complete and utter lack of anything else to be pleasing to God, other than putting the brakes on the usual business of achieving or claiming for ourselves, or putting our best foot forward, and offers us the freedom that comes when we recognize that we are totally unworthy of forgiveness and merit no measure of grace, and yet have received grace in abundance. For the tax collector, who could not even lift his eyes from the ground for shame, returned to his house justified.

And in a remarkable move, Jesus calls us out, and gives us no other option then to accept his premise that God desires a broken heart above all else by making us desire to identify ourselves with the first-century scum of the earth! Joel 2 says “Yet even now, says the Lord, return to me with all your heart, with fasting with weeping, and with mourning; rend your hearts and not your clothing. Return to the Lord, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and relents from punishing.”

Rending hearts is a humble enterprise indeed. It means realizing that there is no such thing as breathing a sigh of relief that we are not as bad off or as sinful as another, it means that we cannot reduce our confession to the recitation of a printed prayer each week without first recognizing that with each word of our prayer we utter a sin that drove nails into the flesh of Christ. It means that the moment we feel a sense of pride in the phrase “all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted” is probably the moment that we are farther from the justification before God that Christ speaks of, than we could even imagine.

And yet being humbled before God in confession does not mean disciplining ourselves with self-loathing or a perpetual cycle of grief for the fact that we are fallen sinners, it means disciplining ourselves to recognize that while our sin is perpetual, so is the love of God. Who took on the gravity of our sin with its power to crucify and kill, even unto his own death so that we may experience joy and life and salvation forever - in this world and the next.

And so our familiar preparation for Easter begins. The meal is being planned, the festivities organized. Brass horns polished and frilly pastel dresses ironed. Folding chairs are being stocked in the overflow rooms of sanctuaries everywhere. And we are given one last quiet week to take a long and hard look within ourselves, to be mindful that we do not stride so confidently up the temple steps, and to become acquainted with the posture of being humbled before God. To be shocked again that in the kingdom of God we should be so fortunate as to liken ourselves to the tax collector in our brokenness because only in this simple but profoundly difficult task can we begin to walk in Christ’s shoes through Holy Week. And see that we must understand every inch of our forgiven selves through the lens of the cross and resurrection. For mercy was not enthroned in heaven until it was crowned with thorns. We cannot find pardon without first journeying to Gethsemane to see Christ sweating in anguish. We cannot seek peace of conscience without first turning to the victim bleeding misery, we cannot raise our hands to the sky in celebration without first pounding our chest because there is no forgiveness apart from Christ who died for us.

Confession thus prepares our hearts to meet God by giving us a sober vision of who we are not, so that we will despair that we are fallen; but so that we might understand the magnitude of the grace that was given to us, experience the joy of a forgiveness that has already been freely given and does not require anything of us other than just simply accepting it. And in this grace alone we will return to our home justified and rejoicing on that final day of our resurrection - when we join all the other sinners at Jesus’ side in a final Easter Sunday celebration that will last throughout eternity. So let us accept the invitation to experience the life-giving freedom of being humbled before God in the simple confession, “God be merciful to me a sinner.” For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted. Amen.