

Being Dead

You can sit back and relax today. Today's parable is more about we clergy than you who are not. Yes, you can relax. Today it's "yours truly" in the cross-hairs of today's lesson.

Do you remember the Woody Allen classic: Annie Hall? There's a scene outside the movie theater, waiting in line, when a college professor, also in line, starts pontificating loudly about a well-known philosopher of the day: Marshall McLuen.

The man in line is going on and on about the meaning of McCluen's work, it's "deepest insights" and so forth. Suddenly, Dr. McCluen himself appears from some invisible place and confronts the loudmouth and says to him: "I heard what you were saying. You know nothing of my work! How you got to teach a course in anything is totally amazing!"

We who stand before you week in and week out; preaching, we hope, the word of God, we run the risk the most of being that loudmouth know-it-all standing in the line.

Such is today's parable. The Pharisee, or, if you prefer, your friendly neighborhood Episcopal priest, goes to church to pray. He's doing all the right things. He's generous to a fault (he tithes everything he has; the rules only require that he tithe a portion). He doesn't fool around on his wife. He's not a thief. He doesn't strong-arm the poor.

Isn't this exactly who we want in church? Wouldn't this be a great guy, if not as the Rector, then at least on the Vestry? Give me a dozen men like that! In short, he's a good man. Egotistical, sure, but still a good man. And what's a little ego if he tithes ten percent?!

Now, it's important to get this right.

We Christians have grown up thinking of "Pharisee" as just another word for "hypocrite." But when Jesus spoke, as the people listened to his story today, the Pharisee is to them an admired man.

In Jesus' day, the Pharisee is a pillar of the faith, a pillar of the community. Like your Rector!

So there we have our Pharisee (your Rector) giving thanks that he is not a scoundrel. But right behind “Mr. Pillar of the Community” stands Guido, the tax collector. Today he is the loan shark tough guy who shakes people down so he can live well. He’s got on his gold chains, a nice, fat diamond stud earring and a call girl waiting for him in the stretch limo, blowing exhaust in the church parking lot.

That’s Guido. That’s the tax collector.

Tax collectors then, like loan sharks now, were despised. They are Jews who work for Rome. They know the language; they know where you live; they know where you shop; they know where you hide your money. And, they want it!

So there they stand. The two of them. The Rector gives thanks for his accomplishments. Guido bows his head, beats his breast, and asks: “Mercy.”

And just like the Woody Allen movie, Jesus pulls God into the scene, and God says to the Rector: “I heard what you were saying. You know nothing of my work! How you got to teach a course in anything is totally amazing.”

And Guido?

He goes home, justified.

You might take this as a parable of humble prayer vs. arrogant prayer. And certainly that is part of its punch. But it is not just that.

It is instead a story of the foolishness that motivates anyone, but particularly the clergy, to seek to justify ourselves before you or God.

It can’t be done. I can’t “good deed” myself to salvation. And if that’s my goal, to “good deed myself” to salvation, then I don’t need God anyway. I can do that stuff myself.

Except, I can’t.

You see, the difference between the tax collector and the Pharisee; the difference between Guido and the Rector, is this: Guido knew he was

dead. The Rector pretended he wasn't. And that is what might be at the heart of the lesson today.

We are all dead. Oh sure, we're running around just fine today. But over the long haul, we are all like the folks that Mark Twain's just released autobiography makes fun of. Twain ordered that the book not be published until 100 years after he died, so all the people he makes fun of wouldn't feel bad. They'd be dead. And in a hundred years, so will most of us be.

If we live this life with a for sure sentence of death, there is no preening, no good works, no nothing we can do on our own to beat death. Only the God who raises the dead can beat death. And resurrection is not something that can be bargained for or deserved or something I am entitled to. It is gift.

What the tax collector brought were empty hands that only God could fill. By admitting he was dead, he became open to the grace of God. The Pharisee, however, came to pray with hands that were full; full of his own efforts; his own judgments; his own sense of entitlement. There was no place in those full hands for mercy, for grace.

Today's parable does the unthinkable. It asks us to see ourselves not through the eyes of our neighbor, but through God's eyes. And that is a terrifying request. Many of us define who we are based on the approval we get from other people. Many of us spend countless hours dressing up in front of the mirror of their opinions, to keep from thinking about the nightmare of showing ourselves to be naked and a mess. This parable hurts because it insists that our true condition is nakedness; not the tuxedos we wear to impress one another.

When God steps into the movie line, and dismisses the Pharisee, and justifies Guido, God is saying to you, to me, that "we will never be free until we are dead to the whole business of justifying ourselves." [Capon, Parables of Grace, 343].

For weeks now we have reflected on the character of God's mercy. Today, the focus comes home to you and I. Now the question is: "What is the character I need to receive God's mercy?" And the answer, it seems, may be this:

“Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.”

“Blessed are those who know they are lost, God has already found them.”

“Blessed are those who delight in the unfair, upside down generosity of God, they will share in it as well.”

Fr. Capon puts it this way: “Only when you are finally able [with the tax collector] to admit that you are dead will you be able to stop balking at grace. It is, admittedly, a terrifying step. You will cry and kick and scream before you take that step because it means putting yourself out of the only game you know. For your comfort though, I can tell you three things:

1. it is only one step;
2. it is not a step out of reality into nothingness, it is a step from fiction into fact;
3. it will make you laugh out loud at how short the trip home was, in fact, it wasn't a trip at all; you were already there.” [Id.]

amen+