

Psalm 84

84 How lovely is your dwelling place,
Lord of heavenly forces!
2 My very being[a] longs, even yearns,
for the Lord's courtyards.
My heart and my body
will rejoice out loud to the living God!
3 Yes, the sparrow too has found a home there;
the swallow has found herself a nest
where she can lay her young beside your altars,
Lord of heavenly forces, my king, my God!
4 Those who live in your house are truly happy;
they praise you constantly. Selah
5 Those who put their strength in you are truly happy;
pilgrimage is in their hearts.
6 As they pass through the Baca Valley,[b]
they make it a spring of water.
Yes, the early rain covers it with blessings.
7 They go from strength to strength,
until they see the supreme God in Zion.[c]

Luke 18

⁹ Jesus told this parable to certain people who had convinced themselves that they were righteous and who looked on everyone else with disgust: ¹⁰ "Two people went up to the temple to pray. One was a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. ¹¹ The Pharisee stood and prayed about himself with these words, 'God, I thank you that I'm not like everyone else—crooks, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. ¹² I fast twice a week. I give a tenth of everything I receive.' ¹³ But the tax collector stood at a distance. He wouldn't even lift his eyes to look toward heaven. Rather, he struck his chest and said, 'God, show mercy to me, a sinner.' ¹⁴ I tell you, this person went down to his home justified rather than the Pharisee. All who lift themselves up will be brought low, and those who make themselves low will be lifted up."

Sermon

Grace to you and peace from God our Creator, our Lord Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit: Amen.

Now, before we dive too deeply into the sermon, I'd like to teach you a song that will help you remember Jesus's words from Luke today, because I think they're such important words to remember. *Humble thyself in the sight of the Lord. Humble thyself in the sight of the Lord. And God will lift you up, higher and higher! Yes God will lift you up...*

One way to consider the importance of this parable is reflecting on how we focus our faith. I'm not sure how many of you have taken pictures before with an SLR camera, especially since cameraphone technology has advanced so significantly. But the nature of focusing is essential for taking accurate pictures of pretty much anything. The autofocus on your iPhone and even the simple focus of the disposable and point-and-shoot cameras so common a

decade ago enabled us to lose focus – see what I did there? – on the complex nature of how to focus when taking a picture. We've also forgotten that you can change lenses to help get a better picture, a different kind of perspective, on the same subject.

In other words, with pictures, what you look at matters to both the lens you choose and the way that you focus. And you know, I think the same is true of our Christian life. Perspective, another central theme within photography, greatly shapes our religious journeys. At times, we'll focus on others, and at other times, we'll focus on ourselves. What we look at matters because at times we need to admit our own needs, like the tax collector in today's Gospel reading, and at other times approach the needs of others in compassion, something the Pharisee was absolutely unwilling to do.

For this to work out, though, we must use the lens of Jesus to look at everything. Equally important to addressing

ourselves and others is how we look at what we're looking at. Have you ever had someone look at you from across a crowded party and made you feel like the only person in the room? Or have you ever been with someone who looked at you with such vile that you felt just so desperately lonely? Or maybe a Pharisee stared at you while praying because they were simply so thankful they weren't you, demeaning your faith even as they elevated themselves in their religious journey? It doesn't just matter that we look at people, because we can look at people all sorts of ways. It matters equally how we look at people, both others and ourselves. That's why the lens of Christ is so vital, because looking at the world through Jesus's eyes help us to truly focus on what matters.

We often think that tax collectors weren't religious people, but that's not the case. Rome loved to use natives of the regions they were taxing to collect taxes. These

people would obviously know the population better, which helped them collect maximal money for the state and to pocket some extra change for themselves. So, the tax collectors in Jesus's time were most often Jews, just like the Pharisee. That's one odd part of this story, namely that both of these characters are typically disliked, if not despised, by the commoners to whom Jesus is preaching. But Jesus chooses to lift one of them up, the tax collector, because only the tax collector is willing to look at himself with humility. It seems that the meaning of this parable begins with a willingness to look honestly at the self.

In fact, Jesus says just that. "All who lift themselves up will be brought low, and those who make themselves low will be lifted up." *Humble thyself in the sight of the Lord...* How we look at ourselves matters because it shapes how we look at other people. The focus that employ when we look at the world and ourselves matters to God because

we're much more willing to have compassion on others if we have an honest assessment of our own needs, our own failures, our own shortcomings. The Pharisees problem isn't that he's wrong about the sins of others. It's that he's unwilling to address the sins in himself first. He's got no humility whatsoever, and without that, there's a chasm between the Pharisee and the tax collector.

To paraphrase the author Donna Lynn Hope, "The most beautiful people I have known had one thing in common apart from beauty: humility. It's a shame that those with less to boast about do it the most." Yikes! How harsh is that!?! But how true, as well? Ms. Hope catches on to something here, something that I think is more true in my soul than I know how to fully speak. Humility itself is beautiful. I don't mean self-deprecation, nor self-hatred. Those things carve heinous marks into God's wondrous artwork of the human person. But humility strikes the most gorgeous chord in the people I

find most attractive. I don't necessarily mean romantic attraction here, but the kind of magnetic personalities that draw people into themselves. Regardless of gender, of age, of physical aesthetics, humility draws people together.

Humility makes us beautiful because, I think, it makes us honest about ourselves, our needs, and our reliance upon others, and in so doing, it draws us closer to one another.

But that just tells you why humility matters to me. What difference does humility make to God? Dietrich Bonhoeffer helps to highlight this for us in helpful ways. While teaching at Finkenwalde, the underground seminary that resisted Nazi influence in the church, Bonhoeffer wrote a book called *Life Together*. In it, Bonhoeffer says, "If my sinfulness appears to me in any way smaller or less detestable in comparison with the sins of others, I am still not recognizing my sinfulness at all." If my sinfulness seems less significant to me than your sinfulness, then, well, I just don't really know

my sinfulness at all. That's the antithesis of humility, at least theologically speaking. Humility, in dictionary terminology, is that "quality of not believing you're better than someone else." in theological terminology, humility is honesty about our sinfulness, our needs, our reliance upon God, and an awareness that our sins are no less important than the sins that others bear before God. Obviously, the Pharisee doesn't get that and the tax collector does. From God's perspective, humility as a focus indicates an awareness that we need God, that we admit our reliance upon Jesus. That's a focus that matters.

But humility doesn't matter as an academic exercise so much as it matters as a practical component for life together. As long as this Pharisee stands in self-satisfaction about how much better he is than this tax collector, there's no possibility for them to have a relationship of any mettle. No friendship, no church, can exist without the humility of

this tax collector. Humility matters because, without it, we think we're good enough on our own, and so we don't need anyone. Someone in this state surely doesn't need that tax collector praying over there, and most definitely not God.

That, you see, is why focus is so important, and especially, a focus on humility. There are times we should focus on ourselves, but not a focus that says we're ok by ourselves. There are times we should focus on others, but not a focus that condemns others as less than us. God is always the lens through which we should look at everything and everyone. We should always look at others and ourselves with the eyes of Christ, focusing not on who's sinned the most but on our common need of Jesus's intervention on our behalf. Putting on the lens of Christ, using the divine focus, doesn't mean ignoring sin, but it means trusting God's mercy for us all, which begins with admitting that we need

mercy from God, and maybe even from the tax collectors in our lives. That kind of focus takes a deep kind of humility.

You might still be wondering why we began this sermon with a song. Newsflash: it's going to end with it as well. That's because, as Bonhoeffer talks about sin, humility, and forgiveness in *Life Together*, he suggests, "The fact that we do not speak our need for (mercy) but (also) sing it only expresses the fact that our spoken words are inadequate to express what we want to say, that the burden of our song goes far beyond all human words." In other words, songs help to solidify the meaning of what we say and carry that meaning deeper into our hearts.

I've found that true of this tune, one that I learned as a child at Camp Mowana, an ELCA Outdoor Ministry in Ohio. Humility, recognizing my need for God's mercy in the midst of my sin, is something I need to constantly embed deeper within my life. Fortunately, that song still resonates deeply

within my soul, reminding me of the vitality of humility, that God's desire is for the humble in heart because the humble in heart know that they need God. It helps me to continue to look through the lens of Christ at myself and at others. It helps me to focus on the blessing that others bring and on my need for mercy from them and from God. My hope, as we sing this together once more, is that it will settle deeper into all of our hearts, becoming a lens and a focus through which we encounter the world.

Humble thyself in the sight of the Lord. Humble thyself in the sight of the Lord. And God will lift you up, higher and higher! Yes God will lift you up...

Of course, a fear remains with humility. If we're humble, will we be appreciated? Will community truly form? Or will the Pharisees in the world still disdain us? We will be appreciated, though perhaps not by the Pharisees. In the

words of Jesus, and the words of this song, we can trust that,
in your true humility, God will always lift you up. Amen.