

“Mirror Image”

Sermon on Sunday, October 23, 2022

Dear church,

I must make a confession at the beginning of this sermon. Upon hearing this parable again, I was tempted to say to myself, “Thank God, I am not like this self-righteous, god-awful, son of a gun Pharisee,” which means... I missed the point of the story. Initially, at a gut level I did. Almost any time we say, “Thank God, I am not like so and so,” there is something missing in the empathy and self-awareness department. The point of the parable is not to gain a better critical awareness of others (as if we needed more of that) or to catch hypocrites in the act, which I have done in my mind a few times and I am guessing you have too. The point is to come to a moment of honesty, self-recognition, and recognition of the other as a human being, without judgment. The parable takes place in the Temple, in the house of God, in the presence of God. We are not going to the House of God to judge others, ever. Imagine your worst enemy praying here in the church. And you say to that person and you mean it, “Good to see you!”

Refraining from judgment is sometimes amazingly hard to do in our world. Last week I followed the messy resignation of the latest embattled British Prime Minister, hoping that the British people will soon be steered into calmer waters, because we need wise and smart leaders more than ever and it seems like they are in short supply world-wide. There is too much finger pointing and, yes, hypocrisy in politics, too much wishing that the other side, the other party, the other candidate, will fail instead of looking for the greater good. I am afraid this systemic divide rubs off on the public and on the psyche of the people. Election time is coming, and you see this parable of the Pharisee and the sinner re-enacted in almost every political ad, don't you? The underlying message is: “Thank God, I am not like my opponent, who has done this and that and who has said this and that in the past – and is not to be trusted.” With thousands of ap's in our world, is there an ap that automatically bypasses political ads? It would be a service to the public. It would be a service to God.

This parable of the Pharisee and the sinner invites us, all of us, to look in the mirror, to be honest and genuine in the presence of God who always looks at us with eyes of love and grace, who I am sure smiles sometimes at our flaws. And we are invited to remember that often the biggest infractions aren't committed by the obvious candidates, those who appear in the blinding light of torrid tabloids, but they are committed by crafty fellows, in subtler ways. Remember, the snake in the garden was called "crafty?" So often we don't even know when we are part of it. The Pharisee in this parable had no clue that he was part of a bigger problem. He was too busy looking at others.

Tomorrow we will hold a service of remembrance for Paul Smith. I met with the wonderful Smith family last Friday to go over his life. We had many good laughs even though it is sad that this man died at the relatively young age of 53. And we all knew, part of the early decline of his health was of his own making; he was not one to change his lifestyle or habits. He didn't listen. But I am sure God chuckled many times over his wayward child Paul. One of the funniest stories that I heard about Paul was when, back when he was a teenager or adolescent, something got caught in a tree and the Smith boys couldn't get it out. Paul finally found a golf club, and with his pitching arm he hurled the club toward the object to get it loose. I am not sure he achieved his goal, but he achieved this: the club came back and hit him on his head, leaving a gushing wound. When the doctor asked, "Young man, how did this happen?" he said, "Oh, a golf club fell out of a tree." That was Paul.

We can all laugh about that, but I always appreciated this about Paul: that he was who he was, and he didn't try to hide it. And I also appreciated that his family didn't try to change him. They were wise enough to know that it would have been a waste of energy. He was who he was, and he was fully accepted that way. Almost every time I went to the hospital or said a prayer for him over the phone, I could hear some tears and sniffles, the softer side of the man coming out. In those moments too, he was who he was.

We often say in our church that everyone is welcome. Everybody can come the way they are and must not hide and suppress parts of themselves that they fear will be judged. And

when we put those messages out – many churches have it on their official sign (Everybody is welcome!) – I always hope and pray that it is true, that people don't contradict the official message by secretly judging people. Not in our daily lives, but most certainly not here, in the house of God, not in the presence of God.

The Pharisee pointed at the obviously flawed man in this parable, and he deemed himself superior and safe because he followed all the rules. By doing so, he contradicted what true religion is about: seeing ourselves and others in the light of God, not in the light of some moral code, not against the shadow of our failures, but in the dawn light of creation. Perhaps we can look in the mirror and then take the statement that Jesus made at the end to heart: "For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted." **Amen.**