



My sermon today will have three points—like tens of thousands of hum-drum sermons do. I used to think the reason I put in three points is to stop myself from going on and on, to number 4, 5, 6, ... 15. Lutheran pastors often preach longer than Episcopal priests, but at least *you* know that if the sermon today has three points, it *will* come to an end.

The more important consideration is that a sermon *with three points* must be *sharp* enough to jab those who need jabbing, sort of like acupuncture, without shredding every feeling or shedding too much blood. But in *this sense*, a lot of preachers fail, because they often deliver only three “bumps”—like those annoying bumps on a busy street—which hardly slow down a reckless driver intent on getting ahead. Three *points* would puncture their tires, wouldn’t they? A flat tire forces you to slow down, and consider where you’re going!

But—full disclosure—I don’t “think up” the points I am presenting. In most cases it’s the Bible which delivers the first jab. Today’s Gospel reading is no exception. In Luke’s telling, the “point” is abundantly clear before Jesus even speaks. “He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt.”

Seriously, now, this is an “ouch” moment. I understand, if you just quietly slip out of the room before Jesus jabs you again! “The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector.’” Jesus tells fictional stories, as examples from daily life in his time. Seeing the super-pious making grandiose gestures toward God is something everybody probably witnessed in the Temple or local synagogue. We see it nowadays, especially on TV.

One of my *favorite* cartoons shows a tall, rather rotund Bishop, dressed in his ecclesiastical finery with crozier and mitre, in conversation with a scrawny little parish priest dressed all in black. “I know, Father Quigley,” says the important Bishop to the priest, “that in the eyes of God we are all *equal*. But I can’t imagine *why*.”

**So, point number 1.** Our first mistake is to think it’s an *achievement* to be in God’s good graces. Achievement and grace are polar opposites. We do not *achieve* our salvation, it is a *gift*. Grace means something that is not deserved but *given* to us. For the religious leaders in Jesus’ generation, what he jabs them with is the mistaken belief that they were a cut above, or a step up, because they are *sooo* religious.

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

In our 21<sup>st</sup> century, *achievement* is hard to measure even in the workaday world. Basing things on achievement in this environment and its worldwide web and global economy is idiotic. I tend to think I have *achieved* something when I make dinner, which is not very often. But even then, I *did not* make the *food*. I did not even pick the produce on my table. I did not make the table, I did not build the house, I did not pipe the water or gas and electricity to prepare the meal. I am just as dependent on the mutual contributions of our whole world to my life as others are to mine.

Years past, I spent more than a decade working in the offices of an international firm. Some of those people, including those at a much higher pay grade, would have been clueless how to get their work out the door at the end of the day if it hadn’t been for the secretaries, the copier repair technicians, the people in the mail room.

Even those who are rich, or at least prosperous, have little reason to think it is their *achievement* that put them there, when there is so much evidence that privilege, inheritance, tax loopholes, shady ethics and dumb luck that have given them their advantage.

**Point number 2.** *Achievement*—which counts for nothing in the sight of the God who loves us out of pure grace—should never be left unchaperoned in the company of *arrogance*.

Mr. Pharisee, you *are* like other people—the people who mistakenly believe they are cozy with God because they think they are keeping *all the rules*. Most of us here, I suppose, are tempted to look down on people who work for the IRS, so we'd be in company with those in biblical times who looked down on the tax collector. But *they* had the added bit of arrogance: tax collectors worked for the Roman authorities, not their own government, but an occupying power.

Some years back, an anonymous comedian started a satirical way to skewer “religious” people in America. The principal character is Betty Bowers, “America’s Best Christian,” who claimed she was “so close to Jesus we have joint checking.” Just Google “Betty Bowers + Christian” and have yourself a better time than binge-watching cat videos on You Tube. For example, Betty Bowers explains how “religious freedom” works: “If I discriminate against or criticize you, it’s called ‘Religious Freedom.’ If you return the favor, it’s called ‘Persecution.’” And in a rare moment of pointed honesty, Betty Bowers answers the question “What’s the difference between Atheists and Evangelicals?” Answer: “Atheists are honest about not following Jesus.”

Hopefully, we can laugh at ourselves a little bit, even in the midst of confessing to arrogance. Most of the people to whom Jesus told his parables were poor and lowly. But looking down on *foreign* tax collectors would give them a little status. You always feel *taller* if you can look *down* on somebody else. You can try it here; go ahead: Just stand up, and *look down* on the person sitting next to you. We preachers do it all the time! I feel so tall!

But we are tempted by this mistake, in an increasingly complex world and in difficult times. If we sense our privileges, real or just imagined, are just evaporating before our eyes, we look for someone else to blame: we look down on foreigners, minorities, immigrants, women, “deep state,” politicians in the *other* party, and inmates doing time.

Arrogance has no place in the community of Christ, for if we follow the example of the one who bled and died for us, we cannot ignore his teaching that “a servant is not above his master.” “And when you are invited to dinner,” he said, “begin to take the lowest place.”

One of the things people miss by not being as biblically literate as our grandparents’ generation is that Jesus not only skewered the self-righteous, but also those who felt they were *ethnically* superior. The *sharp* point in the beloved parable of the Good Samaritan—who generously helped the man who had been victimized and left wounded by the side of the road—is that the Samaritans were a despised ethnic blend, not “pure” Judeans. The Judea of Jesus’ generation was a “stew” or “salad bowl” of ethnic groups for the same reason our America is: the migration of peoples because of violence, war, or poverty. Jesus salutes the incredible faith of the Syro-Phoenician woman, another marginalized outsider he encountered. He healed the slave boy of a Roman centurion, and the occupying Roman forces were just as despised as the tax collectors. In the previous chapter of Luke’s Gospel, Jesus salutes the one out of ten lepers who was healed and who turned back to him, fell at his feet and thanked him. “The other nine,” Jesus asked, “where are they? “Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except *this foreigner*?” Who do we think we are? Have you done your DNA test?

**Point number 3** is found in our historic liturgy, my friends. We call it the Passing of the Peace, but it's a whole lot more than just a "hello and good morning" gesture, like an intermission after confessing our sins. The Kiss of Peace, is intended to remind us that we *do not* approach the altar, and we cannot truly receive Christ through the sacrament, if we are not first reconciled to one another. "So when you are offering your gift at the altar," Jesus explains in the Sermon on the Mount, "if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar, and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift."

This mutuality and reconciliation is indelibly printed into the Christian Gospel. We know this. I don't have to teach you. But sometimes we don't "remember" that someone has something against us. We're as clueless as corporate executives.

I think, in our times, the people we hurt are unknown to us. Not just other drivers on the road we have offended, but the people we use through our sense of privilege, or superiority, and the people we exert power over with our wealth or status or education.

The inescapable point of reconciliation is that we *are not* apart, and *may not be* apart from others because of our own actions. Christians have a global faith, and we are called to be united with brothers and sisters from every part of the world where that faith has been taken and taught, planted and *believed*.

In the earliest decades of the Christian movement, the division between Jews and Gentiles was just as enormous as the racism and ethnic supremacy our own times are struggling with. In the letter to the Ephesians [Chapter 2], the writer puts everyone on level ground, reminding readers that all human beings had been captive to passions and senses, "by nature, children of wrath." "But God who is rich in mercy, ... made us alive *together* with Christ—by grace you have been saved"—in other words, *not saved because we are super-religious, or privileged, or native born, or any other measure of superiority we may have invented in our time*. This is a major topic in the letter, where he continues that, in Christ, God reconciles both groups (insiders and outsiders, those who were near, or far). "So then you are no longer strangers and aliens," he says. Christ intends to create *one new humanity, making peace, reconciling both groups* to God, through the cross, putting to death the hostility of one group against another.

In a recent issue of *Christian Century*, it was reported that Natalie Conway, a deacon and longtime member of an Episcopal Church in Baltimore, "was stunned to discover that her ancestors were slaves who had been owned by the founding pastor of the church." The news was also a shock to Steve Howard, a descendant of the family who owned the deacon's ancestors.

The story doesn't end with that shock. "Together they are helping their congregation come to terms with its racist history." They even led a tour of members to the plantation where Rev. Natalie's ancestors were enslaved, and held a worship service in front of the slave quarters.

So there is *no* place in the Christian faith for anything which seeks to divide us. That isn't just a rhetorical flourish, my friends. It is the foundational principle of Christian community, that there are no meaningful distinctions between us and *anybody else* before God. Not only are we all equal in the sight of God, we are given this mission to build a community which embodies this reconciliation, this oneness.

Now—you and I—where are we called to build community, to reconcile from our place of honest humility? Will you volunteer for this kind of holy work? Amen?