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Luke 18:9-14

Um . . .

I was sitting in a dimly lit chapel at a Trappist monastery in northern California about 10 years ago. My friend and I had driven down a few days before on a term break from seminary and were feeling very comfortable in the space. Besides, we were seasoned worshippers: we knew the routine, and were very comfortable approaching God on our own. We had the privilege of entering into the flow of the monks' daily worship, riding on their wave of spiritual connectedness. On that particular day a young couple sat next to us in the visitor's section. I remember the young man kneeling on the floor in the row of chairs. He touched his forehead to the floor and nestled his head in with his hands. My friend and I were a little startled to see this behaviour and gave each other a look that said, "well, that seems a little excessive." Later on we learned that the couple was maybe 20, newly married and were struggling to find grounding and direction in life. The young man was a new convert to Christianity and eager to dwell closely with God . . . which, after observing him in worship, made sense. But what was I doing? Instead of fostering my own connection with God in worship, I was focused on him and his relationship with God.

The text this morning makes an interesting point about this. For the characters in the parable, the disconnection from God isn't related to the way they live their lives. It's about the attitude of their hearts.

The Pharisees don't have a great reputation in the Christian scriptures with all the grief they give Jesus, but the Pharisees were actually the progressives of the day. They held to a liberal interpretation of scripture, and the aim of Pharisaic law was to make observance of the Torah available to all.¹ (pause)

¹ Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol 4, p. 213.

It's curious that Jesus has him going to the Temple at all; being the first to promote the "priesthood of all believers," the centre of their religious lives is in the home.² This one apparently prays in the temple too.

Tax Collectors, on the other hand, were given the privilege by the empire to live a wealthy lifestyle by collecting taxes from the local community by any means necessary and paying the empire a fixed amount. Any surplus was the Tax Collector's to keep. They were often foreigners and were seen to be (and sometimes were) corrupt, unethical and dishonest. It's no wonder they are despised.

By appearances and reputation, these two people couldn't be more different, yet they both end up at the temple to pray. They both go with the intention of time alone with God, and we see beyond appearances to the state of their hearts in their prayer. What is the difference? It's humility, of course (I thought about that as a sermon title).

Humans are good at deceiving ourselves that what we're doing is connecting with God. The Pharisee's way of doing this is by praying gratitude, "God, I thank you . . . I thank you that I am not like other people." Sorry man, when you're comparing yourself to other people, that's not gratitude. You're wrapped up in human things, in the ego, which couldn't be further from God's heart. But you long for God's heart, as we all do.

When these men come to pray at the temple, they enter the outer court, the court of the Gentiles, as it was called. It's the gathering space for the community, and where worship was held. This is as far into the temple as they were allowed to go in body, but we have a great capacity within us all to draw close to God. In our hearts we can move past the outer court, through the court of priests, a space of ritual, of purification and preparation, letting go of the stuff of this world. In our hearts we can enter the chambers outside the Holy of Holies and walk past the veil to be with God.

Interestingly, do you recall that line in Matthew's gospel while Jesus is dying on the cross – just as Jesus dies the veil in the temple is torn from top to bottom – it's always been a curious addition to the

² Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol 4, p. 215.

story. It's a symbolic way of saying, you don't have to go through the corrupt temple system to access God – in Jesus offering himself, the veil is torn and God is accessible to everyone. And our souls long to be in this space, to let the world go and to rest in God. Still, we can't get there if we're concerned with what other people are doing or compare ourselves to others. We can't get there without acknowledging our need for God, our dependence on God. It just doesn't work, there is no room for ego in the holy of holies within us.

To be clear, we are not bad for exercising ego or judging others or turning from God in various ways. Humans are judgmental . . . but we can get into trouble when we don't own it. And owning it is sometimes hard. I don't know about you, but when I think about the Pharisee and the times I focus on others, these are some of the moments where I am most in need of God. The thoughts, feelings, behaviour act as symptoms of our need for God.

It seems the work for the Pharisee and for us is to acknowledge and move our egos out of the way so we can give our souls what they have been longing for all along. It's a lifelong journey and we're in it together.