

Joel 2:23-32 and Luke 18:9-14

Who said we wouldn't have beautiful fall color this year? Hasn't it been amazing...every road you took, such a display...glorious reds, oranges, yellows contrasting with the deep and subtle greens. God, the artist, surely created glorious tapestries of color in these hills....What a gift! And now with the rains and mighty winds...we are in the last phases... but still the subtle hues engage our imaginations.

Let us be in prayer: Colorful Creator, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts together be acceptable to you, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Someone called our Luke story today...."a dance between pride and humility." And what a dance it is! Jesus tells this parable because he says that some were "trusting in their own righteousness while holding others in contempt." I wish I could say that I never do that...

Look at these two figures. One was a Pharisee. Pharisees were really Jewish religious leaders of the day whose aim was to preserve the faith...to preserve the traditions, the upholding of religious laws, and to encourage fellow Jews to be faithful. It doesn't sound so bad so why were they often ridiculed in the Gospels? Why were they made out to be hypocrites? Perhaps they really were... or maybe Jesus used them to set an example for us.

This Pharisee is standing in the temple, praying, and proudly proclaiming how glad he is that he is not like other people; thieves, adulterers or even like that tax collector over there... Just to make sure God knows, he tells how often he fasts: twice a week, AND he gives a tenth of all his income to the synagogue! He is a model person of his faith! *Except* that pride itself becomes his problem. You might call him "bragadocious!" His elevated position in his religion, becomes a stumbling block to his humility.

We know people like this...certainly not any of you nor me...how glad we are that we are not like that....so proud, always right, one of the "good" ones, has God on our side, all the time! Pharisees of today would be...well, me! Our own religious leaders, those of us connected with the church, ministers/pastors, deacons, ministry members, Sunday School teachers, congregants...and so we are called to self-reflect!...Do we sometimes consider ourselves slightly more righteous... a little closer to God... because

we do come here to worship, to pray, to learn of the faith?...ARE we just a little bit better than those who call themselves "nones?" You know, the ones who write "none" for the question about church affiliation....?

This parable is *exactly for us*.

On the contrary and perhaps, ideally, our connection with the church is supposed to teach us humility....to hold a mirror before our eyes to see if we appear "holier than thou." And that brings us to the other character in the parable.

The tax collector. Now this guy was despised but not because he was a Samaritan, a Prostitute, a person with leprosy, or a shepherd... as some of the other characters who become the "good guys" in Jesus' parables...the tax collector was part of a franchise of the empire who basically robbed people! It was standard practice to add a commission to the tax owed the Roman government and some tax collectors squeezed as much as they could from the population in order to line their own pockets.

But this tax collector is in the temple, too. And he is also praying...but what a different kind of prayer. Instead of standing before God declaring how good he was, this man can barely look at God. A friend recently told me that she often looks down, at her heart, to pray; to see what is in her inner being from the Divine. This tax collector is beating *his* heart... so ashamed that he has not allowed God to speak to him through his heart...and he cries out for mercy.

Jesus says the latter...this crooked tax collector...in his deep humility, will be the one who will be justified, made right, by God! Pride versus humility. Of course, this is such a tricky thing... it is possible to become proud about being humble... Martin Luther said, "True humility does not know that it is humble. If it did, it would be proud from the contemplation of so fine a virtue!"

So how do we do this?

Perhaps it is about stepping back to really see the ways we are all in this together...to see our commonality with each other, and to very simply, love one another as fellow beings in God's universality. It seems to me that we cannot judge others, if we really love them. Now I find myself really tested as I listen to the current political conversations in our country...I will just leave it at that, but you know what I mean...how easy it is to say things like, "thank goodness I am not like those people"....no matter what stance you take!

Mother Teresa said, "If you judge people, you have no *time* to love them." Instead of judging the tax collector, what if the Pharisee held some compassion for him and recognized a common need for forgiveness?

Richard Rohr wrote an article about how our language itself can create polarizing mindsets...and surprisingly, he said even when we talk about feeding the poor, or perhaps buying supplies for refugees, or walking for those who are hungry. As beneficial as these efforts are, he says our words can place "them" in separate categories...the poor, the hungry, the refugee....See how even with good intentions, we create separations. We want to help *them* but *they* are surely not *us*! See what a slight shift there is if we can get to a "we are all in this together" way of thinking?

Rohr suggests moving away from *who is in* and *who is out*, by embracing the widest range of diversity possible. He suggests saying "when we" all have experienced poverty, illness, hunger of whatever kind... or saying "at times." At times, we are all discouraged over money or health or belonging....because isn't it so true? None of us are outside of times that have challenged us deeply....and those who have been so privileged in life, may not have the wisdom that accompanies a life that is filled with challenges and experiences.

One thing about having a beautiful church, and we DO...is that we do not want to give the impression of elitism, that we are IN and others are OUT. I think our goal is that this is a place from which God's love spills out *through* the people who come here but also where *we* receive God's love from all who are connected here in a variety of ways.... through our outreach in a multitude of ways. Hopefully it is not *holier than thou*... but *extravagant welcome*... and "we are all in this together."

Richard Rohr said that some people think if they go to church, it will "make God happy." Rohr says that we have tended to make religion separate from life...making the rituals and traditions isolating and not inclusive. He says it is only when we make our religion part of our life, taking it out there with us in each moment of the day that makes God happy.

Kathryn Matthews writes that when religion and churches and our places in them become the END instead of the MEANS, then churches can easily lose their way.

The other day I experienced "church" ... at the gas station. Some of you have heard this story. Lida came to our house and said there was a woman at the gas station who had a van full of dogs, was giving away puppies and didn't have any money to buy

gas. "I'll be right over," I said. A woman was handing out adorable little black pug-lab puppies to anyone around, and giving instructions on their care!

People were curious about what was going on as they drove up to get gas. One man took a picture with his phone to send to his partner to see if he could bring home a puppy; the woman working in the gas station was in tears because she desperately wanted to bring one home but knew her father would say they already had three dogs...which he did as somehow he also appeared out of nowhere... he had tears in *his* eyes and said if he could, he would take them all.

There was so much love in that place...Lida tried to console the woman, the dogs were all barking from the van, the puppies were lifting pitiful eyes in the arms of just about everybody, including me..... I filled the woman's tank from MDF funds....so you all were there, too. In those moments, it was not about who was in or out, but about the loving one another...and it felt like church.

So what does this have to do with leaves falling. I had a nugget of an idea...that somehow, falling leaves relate to humility. I would love to hear your own thoughts on how this comparison might unfold...In spite of the leaves glorious color, they eventually fall. There is an impermanence, a fragility about all life that begs us to not become too proud.

Each one of us has our times of glory and our times of sorrow...times when we are proud and times when we make mistakes. But like the cycle of the seasons, we can stand back a little and know that all of it, every bit of it is within a larger circle of infinite love and grace... we are not alone and we always have a chance for a new start, new growth eventually comes. And how often it is the person you least expect who comes along and gives you hope, or shows you an example of deep faith and powerful love...and that lifts us all. Amen...