

**Sermon: On Thinking Ourselves “All That”****Scripture: Luke 18:9-14****Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans****Date: October 23, 2022**

---

The youth and I down a couple Sunday nights ago talked about the 7 Deadly Sins. I thought that would be a nice light conversation to have with them after playing silly games in Chidley Hall. I was curious to see how much they knew, if Generation Z as they are known, knew anything of the 7 Deadly Sins, this list created by the desert fathers and mothers of the 4<sup>th</sup> century. So I divided them into two groups and had them guess what the list would be, thinking they'd guess at a few but likely wouldn't know the whole list. Well, they got 'em hands down with some debate about which words but ultimately very little trouble. All 7 of them – Greed, Gluttony, Lust, Pride, Sloth, Wrath and Envy. I asked how they knew and they said it's something still in popular culture and one of them said they watched the movie Seven, which is a gruesome movie made in 1995 where a killer uses the 7 deadly sins to motivate his killings.

That movie notwithstanding, it's heartening in an odd way to know that the 7 deadly sins still remain a concept in the minds and imagination of a new generation cause the list really does a remarkable job of capturing the fallen nature of humanity. All these years later, some 1700 years, Greed, Gluttony, Lust, Pride, Sloth, Wrath, and Envy run amok in our world. Not so sure they've dissipated all that much. I'd like to believe that maybe the virtues – generosity, temperance, humility, right action, purity, contentment, peacefulness – have increased in the world? Do you think? I guess it'd be matter of perspective.

The desert fathers and mothers spoke of 2 of the 7 Deadly sins as having a special place as the root of the other sins. The deadliest sin – Pride. And the other deadliest of the deadlies – Sloth. Why sloth? Don't think laziness in work, think apathy, an "eh it's not worth my effort to care" attitude and then you can imagine why sloth. Sloth refuses to address and so enables the run amok nature of all the others.

And then the father of sins – Pride is the other deadliest. It's interesting that in our culture pride has a mixed reputation, we've come to see the importance of healthy self-affirmation. Most of us for instance don't take issue with Pride Day or think that it's a celebration of the sin of pride but rather an important affirmation of a group of people who have been shamed and hurt by our culture and our religion to our chagrin. Some of those who might still believe Pride Day it's a celebration of sin, would themselves have no issue having a parade to celebrate their pride in country. They wouldn't see that as a deadly sin but that I would argue has less justification and hedges into the deadly area more than affirming one's sexual orientation does. Our country and our patriots could use some work on the virtue of humility, I would argue.

All of this is a preamble to the parable offered to us from Jesus this morning, a parable that presents the deadly sin of pride in stark relief for us all to see... and to be judged by. It does what so many of Jesus' parables do:

it challenges tidy assumptions,

confuses rigid certainties,

rattles self-confidence,

confronts self-righteousness,

it, at the very least, gives us pause to think,

“wait, is he talking about me? Am I supposed to be the Pharisee or the tax collector in this story?” And the answer of course to that is “yes”.

Luke tells us what the parable is about in the first sentence, which is rare that we are given the interpretive tool of one of Jesus’ parables: “To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else, Jesus tells this parable.” And then he goes on to set the listener up. “A Pharisee and a tax collector went to the temple,” we are to assume that we are about to hear of how good the Pharisee is and how bad the tax collector would be. If you were a Jew living in first century Palestine this is what you would hear, like me saying “let me tell you about a guy who runs a soup kitchen and a guy who runs an alt-right Nazi group.” We would hear that as being told a story about goodness and badness, a good guy and a really bad guy. The Pharisees were devoted faithful good guys in the culture at the time and the tax collectors were the opposite, about as bad as you could get, defrauding their own people on behalf of the Roman occupation to make money for themselves.

So “a Pharisee and a tax collector went to the temple,” then Jesus yanks the carpet out from under the listener by telling them what this good guy and what this bad guy at worship were praying. The guy who looked good, decent, even holy, for all intents and purposes was praying: “God, I thank you...” so far so good, “that I am not like other people” doh, wait what is he praying? “Thank you God that I am not like other people who are robbers, evil-doers, adulterers, or even like this tax collector.”

Who would be on your list of people you are grateful to God you are not like? I could make a pretty sizable list of all those people who because of who they are make me feel like a pretty decent guy. Thank you bad people! Jesus has

the Pharisee continue “I sure am glad that I am not like those people and that I in fact fast twice a week and I give a tenth of all I have to the temple.” What’s on your list of the things you do that make you better than others? This too could be a pretty sizable list for me if I were honest.

Ideally, we are feeling a little sheepish hearing the good guy’s prayer, we note his arrogance, and then Jesus lowers the boom, the knockout punch, by telling us what the bad guy is praying. He says “The tax collector wouldn’t even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said in the entirety of his prayer “God have mercy on me, a sinner!” Just to give you the full effect of that prayer there’s a couple of things to note. In that day and time, as the biblical anthropologist Ken Bailey explains, it was almost always and exclusively women who would beat their breast in grief. It was far too public and noisy an act of grief for men to engage in. And in all the New Testament writings there is only one other place where people are referred to as beating their breasts in grief. It’s about 5 chapters later in Luke and it’s when the crowd witnesses the crucifixion of Jesus. “And when all the people who came to witness the spectacle saw what happened, they left beating their breasts.” That is a powerful line.

So it is an expression of profound grief and anguish. And that’s how the bad guy is praying with that kind of honesty, that kind of anguish. And you know what happened, Jesus says, “this man went home justified before God and not the good guy.” And then the statement – “for the exalted will be humbled and the humble exalted.”

The desert fathers and mothers went into the desert for years, some sat in caves, some wandered, some gathered into small communities of ascetics, one of them even sat on a small platform on a post for 37 years, all grappling with the sin

in their lives. They were the ones who got really clear on the 7 Deadly Sins, out of which all other sins arise and it was they who highlighted the deadliest of them all as being pride. And many of them came up with practices to move from the 7 deadly sins to the 7 virtues and they realized that working against PRIDE and the placing of SELF at the center undermined the other sins too. Work on pride that tells us we are the center of the universe and greed is diminished, we address pride, the belief that I am all that, and envy dissipates, we confront pride and our righteous anger that leads to wrath inevitably burns less bright.

I hope this parable of the arrogant Pharisee and the humble tax collector might live in us this week to illuminate:

How we raise ourselves up by diminishing others,  
 How we separate ourselves out but lumping other groups in,  
 How we feel better about ourselves by judging others  
 whose lives we know too little about to judge  
 How we tend to pray trying to impact  
 God rather than praying to allow God to  
 impact on us.

The starting place is just to notice how pride operates in us and the weight of our attention begins to make space for something else to enter and abide, namely God's loving presence, in Jesus' name the humble one who was exalted above all, amen.

OFFERTORY: And as we move to collect our offering let me offer that there are at least two pro-active practices that lessen the hold of pride in our lives and that is gratitude and generosity. A state of gratitude will have no truck with pride, you can't really have a grateful heart and prideful heart. And similarly with generosity. They are two things

that we can practice to address our own pride and increase our humility – what are we grateful for and how can we be generous to others. They're like pouring water on the wicked witch, pride says in the face of gratitude and generosity "I'm melting!"

And so as we come to our offertory, we are giving you an opportunity to practice generosity for the sake of Christ's Church here in Winchester. The deacons will now collect the offering.