

October 28

Warm Coat and Blanket Sunday

Joel 2:23-32

Luke 18:9-14

“Forgiveness, Available for the Asking”

Denial plays an interesting role in the cycle of illness, healing, and wellness. For example, one of the symptoms that goes with the onset of a heart attack is denial. It is true that other symptoms of a heart attack may appear to be like the flu, or like heartburn, or some other concern. Much to the relief of many persons with such symptoms, flu and heartburn and other concerns are usually the cause of those elusive symptoms, rather than a heart attack. So please don't get up and leave before the end of the service, convinced that you are about to have a heart attack. However, for a person that is having an episode of major illness, denial may be a comfortable place to run in order to avoid facing the trauma of something as critical as a heart attack.

My father was a great example of this type of denial. Quite a few years ago, he had felt the need to check up on the family property in Republic, a tiny town in the middle of nowhere in eastern Washington. My mother was not able to get away from her responsibilities at their home on Bainbridge Island, so Dad went off to Republic on his own.

One morning, he awoke and just didn't feel well. He thought, “Well, maybe I'll have something to eat.” He didn't feel better. “Maybe I'll lie down a while.” That didn't help either. He tried some antacids, and other over the counter remedies. He only felt worse. He was having a heart attack, but he didn't want to deal with that. My mother, a seasoned veteran of heart disease, carried nitroglycerin tablets for her episodes of angina, and so at one point, Dad wished he could just try one of those. Of course he couldn't, because my mother wasn't with him in Republic. Even wishing for a nitro pill, Dad still wasn't ready to admit he should get to a hospital.

So what did his denial lead him to do? Well, he felt worse and worse, so he couldn't just ignore what his body was trying to tell him. He called a woman that lived about a mile down the road. She happened to be a nurse, and a very sharp, up to the minute nurse. Dad got her on the phone. Did he say, “Hey, I'm having some symptoms that concern me,” or “Should I call a doctor”? Of course not. He knew he was in trouble, but with his cardiac denial working at full speed, he asked her how she and her family were doing, then said to her, totally out of the blue, “Hey, do you have any of those little nitro pills around your house?”

Thankfully, she was on the ball and she knew about the whole denial thing. She had seen it plenty of times in her work. Instead of responding directly to his question, she demanded, “What's going on?” He hemmed and hawed. Then she said, “I'll be right over.” She hung up, dialed 911, and she and her husband rushed over to help my father. Within 45 minutes, he was on a helicopter to a cardiac care unit in Spokane.

Denial plays a critical role in many types of illness and wellness. People with chemical addictions use all kinds of creative denial tactics to avoid admitting the need to get help and recover from their illness. A colleague of mine worked for years as a chaplain in a state mental hospital in Idaho. He finally retired, and used his pastoral skills in all kinds of volunteer and interim ministries. Once I asked him how he was doing, moving from an intense ministry in a hospital for the mentally ill into the ordinary world. “Well, it’s interesting,” he said. “At least when I worked in the hospital, I got to work with people who KNEW they were sick!”

It is the denial of the Pharisee in the parable before us today that cries for attention. Jesus tells a parable about two figures entering the great temple in Jerusalem in order to pray. One is a very upstanding and highly respected member of society, a Pharisee. The other is one that would draw boos and hisses from the first audience to hear this parable. He is a tax collector. Now, in our day and age, someone who is a tax collector is not an evil person. A tax collector may not be popular with many people, but a tax collector is usually an honest, hard-working person.

Not in first century Palestine. A tax collector was usually a Jewish person that had sold out to the Romans for money. Tax collectors were not closely regulated, and they could add their own fee at their own discretion to the taxes collected for Rome. They could use the force of Roman soldiers to help them collect the taxes and their fees, and so they often amounted to extortionists and thugs. And here they were, bullying and extorting their own people for an oppressive foreign presence from somewhere over the western horizon!

In the parable, it is the very best religious person and the very least religious person that are compared in their temple prayers. It is the contemptible person that turns out to be the most righteous, and it is the most admired person that turns out to be spiritually floundering. It would be a bit of a shock to those first hearing this parable to have a tax collector held up as the one getting it right in the temple.

So what are we to do with this parable? Does this mean that Jesus wants this parable to be like a popular caricature of the outwardly righteous person being rotten to the core, while the generous bartender and the good-hearted hooker are to be admired for their rejection of organized religion and religious ritual?

You see, if we leave this parable thinking we should be proud of ourselves for being so humble and for rejecting practices of piety and ritual, we haven’t gained a thing from this parable. We have only moved to another way to be thankful that we are not like “others,” whoever “others” happen to be. We have only become entrenched in the mindset of the Pharisee if we leave this place thankful that we are not like the Pharisee.

You see, the Pharisee in this parable is not a bad person. The Pharisee has complete dedication to the Law of Moses. The Pharisee has even exceeded the demands of the law. He practices fasting and tithing, going well beyond what is expected. He seeks and prays to God. He is perfect in every way. Except that he cannot understand that God

loves him anyway. He cannot understand that, if he were to slip out of his perfection, if he were to make a mistake, if he were to put a foot astray, if he should slightly fall away from perfection, God will still love him, and God will forgive him when he slips. He has not yet discovered the mercy and grace of God, so his life is filled with the need to compare himself to others, and to run others down. He “trusts in himself,” as the introduction to the parable indicates. That is, he is sure that everything God will do is based on his own action, so he works overtime to ensure that he can be a recipient of God’s blessings. His prayer begins as a prayer of thanks to God, but it has a twist in it to draw attention to his exceptional behavior. His prayer has an excessive number of first-person-singular verbs. That is, it is all about “I,” “I,” “I”! He slips into arrogance as he compares himself to others. He has lost sight of the call to love others. And why not? He has also lost sight of the amazing love God has for him, and has replaced it with an almost compulsive drive for ritual perfection. A curtain of denial has fallen in front of him, for he cannot see his own need to accept the love of God. Therefore, love does not motivate him to turn toward others around him in compassion. He fears he is constantly before a cosmic judge, therefore he can only respond to others with judgment and prejudice.

The tax collector, on the other hand, has been struck by something that has caused him to see all his wrongdoing. There is no way he can stand before God and pretend to be righteous. He knows his only hope is to call upon the mercy of God. He is so far from righteousness and perfection, he can only call upon the love of God to pull him out of the messes caused at his own hand. That is his only hope. He cannot trust in himself. He knows he cannot hold others in contempt, either. He has no standing except to place himself in the hands of God and find a love that will cause him to have a total change of heart.

Jayne Hoose writes:

How many of us, at first reading, stop to wonder why the Pharisee feels the need to pray in this way? It can at times be easier to simply judge the actions of others rather than look at what may drive those actions. To act towards others out of love often requires us to look beyond the obvious. What is it that compels the Pharisee to compare himself favourably to the tax collector before God? A more loving response to this parable might be to try to understand the underlying needs and hurt of both the Pharisee and the tax collector.

It is only when we regard others out of love that true humility follows. Love and humility are essential partners. From self love and acceptance arises the ability to put aside the need for both self promotion and the false humility of self abasement. Love of others allows us to build relationships on acceptance rather than criticism and comparison. Such love allows us to walk alongside each other. To achieve true humility therefore we should put love at the center of our lives. If we focus on being humble and striving for humility, on the other hand, then we may achieve quite the opposite affect.

(Jayne Hoose, in *Fruits of the Earth: The CAFOD/DLT Lent Book 2002*. London: CAFOD/Darton, Longman & Todd, 2001.)

You see, without the ability to accept and then share God's compassion, anybody, either perfect Pharisee or tarnished tax collector, will miss the point. The whole idea of "I can do this all by myself, and become perfect by my own discipline!" is to deny one's need for God. What a sham to think that any human being is independent of the Creator God. What an even stronger form of denial to think that love is not needed to bring wholeness and healing of spirit. Albert Nolan writes, "Without compassion all religious practices and beliefs are useless and empty.... Without compassion all politics will be oppressive, even the politics of revolution" (Albert Nolan, Jesus before Christianity: The Gospel of Liberation. London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1977.)

So how would this particular parable change if it is recognized that one does not have to rely upon one's own perfection to gain the favor of God? What if the walls that shut out the free gift of God's forgiveness and love and mercy came tumbling down?

Maybe it would go like this. The Pharisee would pray, "God, thank you for the love and forgiveness that you give me. I love to practice the rituals of faith in order to center my soul upon you. I rely upon my prayers to grow to be more like you, loving One." Then, seeing a remorseful tax collector, the Pharisee would pray, "God, help me to get over my repulsion over this person, one of your beloved children. Give me the ability to see him as you do, and to reach out to him."

Then the tax collector, a heap of tears and fear and sickened because he has recognized the mountain of inhumanity he has committed to get through life, would see a hand outstretched to him. It is the clean hand of someone he has offended greatly, and it is offered with the hope of new beginnings. The two men that entered the temple to pray separately then left the temple together as children of a loving God, both needing to grow in that love, and confident because of that love. Amen.