

“A Matter of Spin” based on Luke 18:9-18
Aspen Community United Methodist Church
October 24, 2010

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A PRINCIPLE EXPRESSED IN THE SCRIPTURE

Our story brings us a principle in scripture
that tells us how when we think too highly of ourselves we are likely to be humbled.

Let’s just call it a spiritual principle.

Luke illustrates it here through an observation of two individuals in prayer.

We might say that Luke’s spin on the spiritual principle is to apply it to these two individuals.

The first individual appears to come before the divine with a great deal of pride to the extent of arrogance.

The second comes before the divine not just with humility but almost self-deprecation.

We are presented with extremes.

EXTREMES AND THE NATURE OF “SPIN”

This is a season of extremes – the election season.

This is a time candidates and their supporters and political parties spin tales about each other.

They want us to make our voting decisions from hyped up images and
pieces of truth decorated with exaggeration.

It works because most people
will not take the time to dig in to the candidates’ position documents
or study the candidates closely enough to make informed decisions.

We call it “spin.”

Spin is not necessarily a bad thing.

A pastor takes a reading from scripture each week and put a spin on it.

Where it runs amok is when it becomes
more than a presentation of the facts – even a creative presentation of what is known.
Spin is a negative thing when it is intended to be deceptive and highly manipulative.

That is what is happening with our political candidates.

A candidate might selectively present facts and quotes that support his or her position -
phrasing something in a way that assumes unproven truths about their opposition.

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Local, state, or national governments utilize spin by announcing a popular thing
at the same time as several unpopular things are happening.
They are hoping that the media will focus on the popular one.

They may delay in the release of bad news
so it can be hidden in the shadow of more favorable news or events.

Sometimes state or corporate run media encourage vigorous debate of trivial criticisms
while serious criticisms remain unmentioned.



I guess you could say that interpreting any event is spin.

Spin is a negative when used to manipulate in a sinister way
as candidates have come to do here in the U.S. in the past few years -
and in particular the ads we are barraged with this election season.

We distrust spin when we don't know who shaped a story and why.

Or we do know who shaped a story and why.

Seldom do we hear a “just the facts” kind of story and it would probably not be very interesting.

SPIN IN THE TEXT

Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John
tell similar stories in different ways for different audiences.
You could call that spin.

So – what might Luke have in mind?

How is he using this biblical principle - this spiritual principle to help us learn something important?

The gospel of Luke gives us a mixed picture of the Pharisees.
For example, two chapters before Jesus tells these two parables about prayer -

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the Pharisees are called “lovers of money.”

But - elsewhere they warn Jesus of Herod’s intention to kill him.

This is just to say that the Pharisees are a complex character study.

These are not one-dimensional people. No one is.

The Pharisees are often targets of criticism by the gospel writers.

Jesus is often portrayed at odds with Pharisees.

But the Pharisees worked very hard at being faithful to their religion.

They tried to do things right.

But they were the establishment and that brings its own assumptions of correctness -
its own spin – if you will.

The tax collectors are not one dimensional characters.

Tax collectors were almost always seen in a negative light.

But – surely it was possible that a tax collector could be an honorable person.

Matthew was a tax collector before Jesus called him to become a disciple.

And we know Zaccheaus whom Jesus chooses as a friend.

It is just that within the culture of first century Judea
the Pharisees are the “goody two shoes” and the tax collectors are “scum of the earth.”

The images I just used are an example of “spin.

A STUDY IN PRAYER

This is the second of two parables about prayer.

Last week we met the persistent widow.

Jesus uses the least likely examples as teaching aids:

Widows were at the bottom of society without power or voice.

And yet how powerful was the voice of this widow.

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In this passage another dimension of prayer is addressed -
the heart of prayer really – who God is -
and who we are before God.

For the Pharisee - God seems to live right inside him.
He praises himself and his works and his own goodness.
He has it all figured out - and things add up rather nicely for him.
Perhaps he comes out looking better than even God does.¹

It helps to have the tax collector nearby for stark contrast
because the Pharisee far outshines him in his virtuous works.

Actually, there isn't much need for God to do anything
in the life of this Pharisee except to agree with him.

And yet Jesus once again uses the unexpected example to teach us.

The tax collector pours out his heart
and buries himself so deeply into the voicing of his anguish -
his most profound awareness of his own weaknesses, failures and sins -
that he apparently never notices the Pharisee - let alone compares himself with him.

He flings himself on the mercies of God
and depends on God to do something remarkable in his life.

DIFFICULTY IN THE EXTREMES

That actually takes us back to our election season.
In each candidate ad we seem to encounter a “goody two shoes” and a “scum of the earth.”

And we see one right after the other and it leaves us feeling kind of schizophrenic.

Well – life was like that for the first century Judeans too.

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They did not have to witness the television commercials.
But they did need to ground their faith somewhere between an assumption
that they had all the answers - and a curiosity about how God
might be trying to do something new in their lives.



Let's take it a little deeper.

I also know I have both characters within me.
And I need to realize that so that I don't fall victim to either one.
We have talked about the tension between arrogance and humility before.

HOW WE GROW SPIRITUALLY

Spiritual growth has to do with finding an inner balance
as we come to understand the extremes within us.

When we begin centering our life in the divine we begin to find balance rather than extremism.

We are less likely to boast – even to ourselves in secret -
that we are glad we are not like someone else – at one time.

We are less likely to grovel in self pity – another time.

So – Jesus teaches a lesson about God's mercy in forgiveness for the tax collector
rather than the apparently holy Pharisee.

When we come before God in humility and openness and trust -
we make room for God to work in our lives.

And coming before God in humility and openness and trust
is richer than all the great works we can manage on our own.

Someone said, “Prayer is the occasion for honesty about oneself and generosity for others.”²

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Honesty flows from openness of heart – an openness of mind.
A life open to God is a life open to transformation.

The hook in this story may be our temptation
to identify with the tax collector and not the Pharisee –
even though the Pharisee may resemble many more of us in many ways
than we would like to think in the life of the church and in society.

It is easy to define ourselves over and against someone else
if we have not come to terms with our own vulnerabilities
and need for forgiveness.

Jesus message is a sharp one.
Bolstering one’s own sense of identity by disparaging others
causes us to be blind to ourselves and who we really are.

I speak of it directly this morning
because we are listening and watching so much of it
this political season.

Let’s don’t get in the habit of it.

Let’s don’t let it rub off.

Even better – call them on it.

CONCLUSION

Well – here we are with Luke’s second parable about prayer.
It gives us cause to consider both the Pharisee and the tax collector
as ways we come before God.

The Pharisee’s spin reveals his arrogance toward the tax collector
and has the flavor of the political ads for which there seems no escape
other than turning our televisions off.

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Let's let it help us be more aware of what we hear on television and what we take from it.

Luke uses two extremes to spin (in a good way) a story for us
to help us learn how to come before God with open hearts and open minds.

When we come before God in humility and openness and trust -
we make room for God to work in our lives.
A life open to God is a life open to transformation.

Amen.

¹ Kate Huey

² Charles Cousar