

Sermon: Year C, Proper 25 (13 October 2013)

Holy and Loving God, write a message on our hearts.

Bless us, direct us, and send us out: living letters of the

Word. AMEN.

I spent part of last night on Beale Street. I wonder how many sermons begin with that line. Perhaps none.

Perhaps it is the homiletical equivalent of, "It was a dark and stormy night." Anyway, I am sorry to report that my evening was not soaked with whiskey and intrigue, as the phrase might suggest, but it was a rather wholesome affair at the Orpheum with the poet laureate of public

radio, Mr. Garrison Keillor and his Prairie Home Companion.

It was a delightful evening, filled with music and laughter and several familiar faces in the crowd. I enjoyed very much Mr. Keillor's comments about how America needs more cities like Memphis, where so many different types of people weave together unlike the more homogeneous parts of our republic. I most enjoyed his stories and he told a delightful one about the mayor of his fictional hometown, Lake Wobegon. The mayor is involved in a battle for reelection and in a very interesting move, she sent the town constable to pick up

her opponent's dog because he was apparently out roaming about and scaring several local children and generally being a nuisance. After his dog's capture, the other mayoral candidate marches down to the city council chamber and rails against what he perceives to be the current mayor's abuse of power. The mayor felt, while awkward, that her decision was entirely justified. Unfortunately, everyone doesn't agree with her and she is horrified when several city council members make remarks sympathetic to her opponent's position. She stands up and yells, "I can't take this ridiculousness and you people any more!" and she marches out of her chair, out of the room, and out the door.

There was only one problem. The door she marched out of was the door to the janitor's closet. Not the grand exit she was hoping for. But there she stood, marinating in the smell of mildewing mops, preparing to emerge from the closet and confront the inevitable smirks of her colleagues.

To attempt to retell a Garrison Keillor story, even only a small portion, is presumptuous in the least, perhaps even impertinent, but this story did remind me of some of the themes in our Gospel text, the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector.

The Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector is a juxtaposition of two very different individuals, and two very different approaches to God. Jesus says, "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector.'" The Tax Collector, on the other hand, stands far off, not even able to look up to heaven, but instead beats his breast and says, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!"

If we are honest and self-aware, all of us can be both of these people and all of us have thought very similar thoughts. This Pharisee could not be more of a horse's backside, "Thank God, I am not like those people ... you know, those people." All of us, myself included, have "those people," people with which we disagree, people who annoy and baffle us, people we turn off when they appear on TV, people who tempt us to partake in that most wretched sins: hate and prejudice. They may be Democrats or Republicans, rich or poor, young or old, you name it. They might be Red Sox fans. Whoever they are, we all have them and our arrogance prevents us from the pleasure of seeing the good in all of God's

creatures, and through that, a greater communion with God. This Pharisee is quite a guy, and if I am honest, I can be a lot like him.

In contrast, we encounter this Tax Collector. The Tax Collector is so separated from the community that he is physically separate, standing "far off" according to the text. And his prayer is much less conversational than the Pharisee. His prayer is almost despairing, a classic lament, and he beats his breast and says, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner." Now, this guy may have been a sinner. He may be a notorious sinner. Tax Collectors were collaborators with the Roman occupiers and

infamous for skimming off the top of their collections for their own benefit. If you took a poll of 1st century Palestinians, many would have rather spent an evening on Beale Street with the stuck-up Pharisee instead of the Tax Collector. But, Jesus, in that annoyingly Jesus kinda way, lifts up those who society marginalizes for the starring role of his stories. This second man, while he probably made some very poor choices, is at least aware of them and in this moment is sorry for them. And most importantly, he takes those choices, those sins, and gives them to God. "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" In a moment of virtuous humility, the Tax Collector

acknowledges his own emptiness, his own brokenness, his basic need for God and asks God for help.

The Pharisee's ultimate sin is not his obnoxious attitude toward others - although that is very obnoxious - but his lack of humility and his inability to acknowledge his own dependence on God. Thank God I, I, am not like those people. *I* do this and *I* do that, so *I* am great. Not very humble at all.

So we return to the Mayor of Lake Wobegone, standing in the janitor's closet. In that moment, in a very faithful, Minnesotan kind of way, I would venture that she felt very

humble. Humiliated to be sure, but humbled, and reminded that even the mayor finds herself in the janitor's closet from time to time. How we exit said closet says a lot about who we are and whether we are a Pharisees or a Tax Collector.

Humility is a goal all of us can aspire to. And real humility is not self-deprecating or insecure. All of us have been given gifts and we should be proud of and confident in our achievements with those gifts. But ... but, the humble balance that confidence with self-awareness that those gifts are gifts from God and that those gifts are coupled with other areas where we could stand to

improve and we are far from accomplished. In the end, the humble realizes that we are really very needy and in order to truly succeed in this life, we need each other and we need God.

This week, take stock of where you are in need. Give thanks for where you are strong, but find help where you are weak. Humbly acknowledge that we can not do everything and we certainly can't do everything ourselves. And instead of ostracizing ourselves in our humility, like the Tax Collector, may we huddle together, be resources for each other, and love each other for who we are, and not because we're not, "those people."

We are all in need, but we can rejoice in the truth that all of our needs will be met; all of our needs will be met by a very generous God. AMEN.