



Getting Over Ourselves

Luke 18:9-14

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Washington Street UMC
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Good morning! It is so good to be back with you today. I am grateful to Dr. Powe for being present in worship last week, and appreciated his message on trauma. And I want you to know it makes your Pastor's heart proud to hear a guest preacher say out loud from the pulpit how welcomed they felt as a visiting preacher. Not that I would expect anything less, but thank you for being you, and for offering such a welcoming and hospitable space!

We are currently in the midst of the season of Lent. Lent offers a time of reflection and preparation, inviting us into an intentional season of readying ourselves for the Easter celebration. During these 40 days, we are invited to acknowledge the ways in which we, as humanity, need the power and presence of God in our midst to do what we can not – to provide new life through reorienting us by the way of divine love.

Over the past few weeks, we've been invited to see how evil lurks in public view through deception, division, and depersonalization, we've considered how our primary sin is a failure to love, and last week Dr. Powe invited us to consider how Christ reorients our understanding of the trauma of others.

This morning our focus is on, quite simply, *Getting Over Ourselves*.

In our Lenten journey, we're invited to be honest about the realities of our world and our own lives to acknowledge where and how we need God to show up with the resurrecting power of Easter. Let us claim that honesty and be real with each other: *we're all just a little bit conceited, aren't we?*

If you're anything like me, your initial reaction is to put a caveat on that statement. Perhaps you're thinking something like, "Yes, I'm a little bit conceited, but have you seen Donny, they're *really* conceited." We couch our self-inflated egos cozily up among others, knowing that as long as our egos aren't as big and boisterous as those of the people around us, we can likely get by with a little self-gravitational-pull, in which a portion of the world revolves around us.

And who can blame us for having an inflated sense of self? That's what society demands of us, at least in the way it distributes honor and recognition. Those who get the most media focus are not always those doing the best and most important work, it's those who are best at calling attention to themselves. We live in a world that has given us permission to be know-it-alls (who often don't know very much at all), so long as we can drive advertising and publicity with our inflated sense of self. This is true for people of many professions, from athletes, to politicians, to wanna-be politicians, to movies stars, to talk show hosts, to the office co-worker (we all know at least one), to the owner of Twitter.

This crisis of ego is a learned behavior, being rewarded as early as grade school where popularity contests determine student government boards and homecoming courts. Even among our own Christian fellowship, in many churches, it is the most eccentric individuals who are invited into pastoral and congregational leadership, with a supposed belief that those with the strongest gravitational pull will “attract” more people and build bigger churches.

This is not to say that all gregarious and confident individuals are inherently failing to live as God has called them to live. As our scriptures this morning will offer, there is a posture towards one-self and one-another that separates those who are filled with Christ ... from those who are full of self.

In our passage from 2 Kings, we find Naaman, who was the commander of the army of the king of Aram. He is said to be a great man in high favor, who, by the hand of the Lord, had been able to lead the army in victory. However, as great a man as he was, he suffered from leprosy.

A bit of context is necessary to understand the rest of the story. Leprosy, at the time, was not understood to be an infection caused by slow-growing bacteria called *Mycobacterium leprae*. It was not known that leprosy is, indeed, a curable disease. It was not known at the time that leprosy both affected the skin and the nerves. ... It was believed that leprosy was a visible skin symptom of an incurable condemnation, and as such, the only way to treat people with leprosy was to isolate them from the community. They were forced out of cities into leper colonies, where they would be left on their own to survive until the leprosy eventually took their life.

Naaman, a wise man of great honor, knew that he couldn't allow his leprosy to be a known condition. The scripture doesn't offer how he hid his condition, but “it's evident he must have lived hiding it from others,”ⁱ or else he would have been relieved of his post. The story gets a bit twisted here – in on one of the military raids by Naaman's army, they took a young girl captive from Israel, and this young girl was forced to serve Naaman's wife. In this capacity, she learned that Naaman had leprosy. She indicated there was a prophet in Israel by the name of Elisha who could heal Naaman, so Naaman went to visit him. When Naaman arrived at Elisha's house, surrounded by horses and chariots, Elisha sent a messenger out to Naaman, telling him that to be cleansed, he must bathe seven times in the River Jordan.

Naaman's response offers a glimpse into his self-absorption. The scripture reads, “Naaman became angry and went away, saying, “I thought that for me he would surely come out, and stand and call on the name of the Lord his God, and would wave his hand over the spot, and cure the leprosy. Are not Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? .. He turned and went away in a rage.”

His feelings were hurt, because Elisha sent a messenger out to him, instead of coming out himself. And he's doubly hurt that he has to bathe in the River Jordan in the land of Israel instead of the rivers back home in Damascus.

You can almost sense his bitterness as he walked into the River Jordan the first time, only to exit with no visible skin healing. A second time, he went in to bathe, still, nothing. A third, and a fourth, and a

fifth ... and you can probably imagine that some folks are now gathering around him, likely his military comrades, and perhaps some passers-by wondering, "What is this man doing? Why is he bathing multiple times?" What Naaman had tried to hide is no longer hidden. A sixth time, still nothing.

"So he went down and immersed himself seven times in the Jordan, according to the word of the man of God; his flesh was restored like the flesh of a young boy, and he was clean."

Pastor Rich Villodas offers, "the seventh time was a manifestation of the healing and transformation Naaman was already experiencing." A change had to have taken place for him to humble himself to Elisha's direction, and to enter himself into the waters of the Jordan, and that change of being manifested inside also allowed for a renewal of his physical well-being.

Sometimes, we just have to get over ourselves to experience the kind of healing our souls need.

We see a similar situation in our Gospel passage this morning, found in one of Jesus's parables. I love how Luke sets up the parable, as he writes, "[Jesus] also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt." We are clued in up front that the parable Jesus is about to tell is going to have to do with those who need to get over themselves.

Two men went to pray at the temple, Jesus begins, one a Pharisee and one a tax-collector. Both men are Jewish, or else they wouldn't be going to the temple to pray. The Pharisee holds a position of high regard in the religious order; the tax-collector does not.

Their prayers are quite different. The Pharisee prays, "God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax-collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income." ... The tax-collector prays, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner."

Jesus finishes the parable by clarifying, "I tell you, this man (the tax-collector) went down to his home justified rather than the other (the Pharisee); for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted."

This is just a parable, but it's a parable that fits the social reality of the constructs of the time. Those to whom Jesus was speaking, those who were up-front defined as "trusting in themselves as righteous, and regarding others with contempt," ... they would have picked up Jesus's not-so-subtle message.

Perhaps the parable doesn't need much clarity, but I want to highlight two things that stand out to me.

First, as the parable is told, the Pharisee comes to the temple to pray and is only worried about how he stacks up against the people around him. His whole prayer, his focus even as he is in the midst of prayer, is on comparing himself to those around him. He came with a list of people whom he felt he was better than, but even added the tax-collector who was praying nearby. As Scholar David Lyle Jeffrey points out, "the Pharisee manages to refer to himself in the first person five times in two verses."ⁱⁱ The Pharisee simply needs to get over himself.

Secondly, we have some understanding of why tax collectors were so despised in the first century (not to say they the IRS is *loved* today). Tax collectors were agents of the state, and were not known for their kindness nor the just practices. Though Jesus did dine with a tax collector who was found to be faithful in his practices, that was uncommon among Roman-employed tax agents. The tax collector does not come into the temple with any attempt to justify their occupational practices. Indeed, quite the opposite, the tax collector comes before God with an honest acknowledgement that they were sinful and in need of mercy. And while we don't know that, at least as far as Jesus' parable goes, the tax collector thought their business practices were sinful – we know that the tax collector humbled themselves, acknowledging their need of God's mercy.

Christ praises this humility. It is the same humility that healed Naaman. It is the humility that Christ is seeking to highlight as faithfulness to those who trust in themselves as righteous, and who held others in contempt.

As Scholar Alastair Roberts suggests, “To pursue the justice of the kingdom, we must resist any attempt to present ourselves as standing on the ‘right side of history’ and, like the tax collector, learn to pursue it in humility from our moral destitution, breast-beating mendicants of divine mercy.”ⁱⁱⁱ

We do no good for ourselves or for one another when we approach each other with a feeling of moral, spiritual, or mental superiority. The Biblical witness makes abundantly clear that the desired posture of God for us, as humanity, is one of humility, wherein we might acknowledge our need of God, our need of each other, and our need to be renewed, to be restored, and to receive the gift of new life. Might we center ourselves before God in the posture of the tax collector, acknowledging our presence and participation in a broken system and society, that we might be receive the gift of God's love in Christ to be made new – that we might receive the gracious mercy of our Lord. So many it be. Amen.

ⁱ Rich Villodas. *Good and Beautiful and Kind*. Colorado Springs: Waterbrook, 2022.

ⁱⁱ David Lyle Jeffrey. *Luke: Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible*. Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2012.

ⁱⁱⁱ Alastair Roberts. “The Politics of Being on the Wrong Side of History.” October 17, 2016. <http://politicaltheology.com>. Retrieved March 8, 2023.