

A Tale of Two Citizens
A Sermon by Louise Westfall
Fairmount Presbyterian Church
Cleveland Heights, Ohio
24 October 2004
11:00 a.m. Worship Service
Text: Luke 18:9-14

Some people have questioned my use of humor in sermons, but for the record I would like to state that I have *never* told political jokes. I've seen too many of them get elected. I am not among those, however, who believe that politics should be kept out of church entirely, as if they belonged to two separate arenas. The Reformed theological perspective has always affirmed that the kingdoms of this world are the places in which God is working to redeem, restore, to establish God's rule on earth as it is in heaven. Christians therefore have a responsibility to participate in the political process of their country, even while acknowledging that all human governments are contingent and flawed. The role of the Church is not to tell its members who and what to vote for (not that you'd listen anyway ?). It is instead to remind us not to leave our faith behind when we enter the polling place. What criteria do you use to determine your choice for president? How will you decide whether or not to vote for the proposed constitutional amendment here in Ohio to ban gay marriage? I hope whomever you vote for, and however you decide, you make those critical decisions with your faith in the foreground. Go into the voting booth with the clear conviction that this world is God's world, the people of this world are God's people, that God loves all the children of the world: red and yellow, black and white, straight and gay, Christian and Jew and Muslim and Buddhist and atheist, American and Iraqi, rich and poor. Your vote, friends, is one way we fulfill our church's mission statement: *...to make a difference in the world.*

On first reading, the morning text may not seem relevant to these concerns. It is a story Jesus told about two men who come, not to a polling place, but to the temple; not to vote, but to pray. The contrast between the two couldn't be sharper. Yet Jesus highlights this contrast in order to contradict it. What appears to be vast difference is upon closer inspection the very thing that unites them. In this season of polarizing political debate, angry, insulting rhetoric, half-truths and sound bites, profound disillusionment and a nagging sense that the process itself is manipulated by powerful, competing interests, the Church has a word of peace and, we are bold to claim, even of hope. Listen then for God's word in the reading from the gospel—the good news—according to Luke, in the eighteenth chapter at the ninth verse. [Luke 18:9-14]

The English satirist Jonathan Swift once observed that most people have enough religion to make them hate, but not enough to make them love one another. It is sadly true that religion has been – and continues to be—a sharp sword dividing people and nations. In the gospel lesson, this sword is wielded by a religious leader in order to proclaim his own virtue in contrast to the sinfulness of another. The Pharisee identifies at length the characteristics and practices that distinguish him from this tax collector, whom he has lumped together with thieves, rogues, and adulterers, implying a blanket condemnation of them all as spiritually inadequate.

If you're like me, however, our sympathies flow uniformly to the tax collector. Few if any of us—even your esteemed pastoral leadership!—would ever claim religious superiority. But that's hardly the extent of Jesus' meaning here. He couldn't have made the Pharisee a less attractive example—none of Jesus' hearers, in his day or in ours, are likely to be compelled by his example of inflated piety. In fact, Presbyterian preaching giant Fred Craddock points out that the danger of this text is that we will leave worship saying to ourselves, "Thank God I'm not like that Pharisee!" ...which suggests to me that there is something here for us to pay attention to. The dynamic that has been so disturbing in this year's election season has been the ugly tenor of the discourse, the disdain expressed by both political parties for opposing candidates, the self-righteousness exhibited by identifying one perspective as "God's way" and using that as a means of eliminating thorough examination of issues or accountability. What we are so good at pointing out in the other party, attributing to the "biased media", or dismissing as "die-hard conservatives" or "flaming liberals" -- what we are so good at pointing out in them is much harder to identify in ourselves. The point of Jesus' parable is less a condemnation of the Pharisee's arrogant self-analysis as it is an invitation to see ourselves as we really are. To see ourselves with the searing honesty of the tax collector who offered no justification but abandoned himself to the mercy of the Almighty. I suggest this posture is a good one to assume as we move toward election day. To recognize that the divisions among us may mask the deeper, essential truth: we are all sinners, unable to fix what is broken in the human soul, incapable of finding what we have lost, and depleted by a hunger we cannot fulfill. At the heart of it, we are united by our common condition and our common need, which makes us brothers and sisters, not adversaries. I wonder what might have happened if the Pharisee and tax collector had not kept their distance in the temple, standing apart, off to the side. What if they had made their confession together?

Maybe the Pharisee would have gained some new insight into his own need; maybe the tax collector would have come to see that true confession is exhibited by changed behavior, by acts of justice. Could these two who thought they had nothing in common have come to embrace each other?

Does that mean we should ignore the differences between the presidential candidates? Or that it doesn't finally matter who we vote for? By no means! I agree with those who say this may be one of the most significant elections of our life time, and we do well to study and reflect, discuss and pray, and make as informed a vote as we possibly can. But I think this text calls us to keep engaged with one another, to see that our future is bound up together—and not only our future, but the future of the world. On November 3 there will be winners and losers (that is, if the votes actually get counted by then), but in the larger picture there will still be profound need that cannot be met with human strength alone. God be merciful to us!

If the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector sounds familiar to you, it's because it sounds a repeated theme in Jesus' teachings. Time and again, Jesus says that the Kingdom of God counters human expectation and subverts conventional wisdom. Jesus reveals that when the Kingdom comes, the high and mighty will be brought low, the little people will be raised, the meek shall inherit the earth, and a little child shall be the leader. I don't hear either political party describing much that sounds like that! That's why I'll cast my vote on November 2 (actually I've already voted by absentee ballot), and then go to the temple to pray. I have faith that I'll be joined there by the church, where we'll sit side-by-side-- liberals and conservatives, soldiers and pacifists, haves and have-nots, the self-righteous and the self-loathing, and pray for God's mercy. And I am just foolish enough to believe that together we will have more and better opportunities to receive what it is we actually need, God's grace sufficient to help us learn to love one another, from now 'til Kingdom come.

O THE DEPTH OF THE RICHES AND MERCY OF GOD! FOR FROM GOD AND TO GOD ARE ALL THINGS. TO GOD BE THE POWER FOREVER! AMEN.

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