

“Upside Down Faith”
Luke 18:9-14

Once upon a time there were two groups of battleships on maneuvers. The weather was terrible, pea soup fog, high winds and seas. The second night out was worse. The captain stood the bridge all night, wary of just second-hand reports. He didn't want to chance the battleships of the other group colliding with them in the open seas. All night he checked on the night sky and what could be seen. Toward dawn the officer yelled, “Light on the starboard side, sir!” The captain yelled back, “Is she steady or moving?” A pause and the reply, “Sir, she's steady!” “Send a message ASAP,” he roared. “Change course 20 degrees immediately.” The message was relayed and sent. Then back came a reply on the radio that was passed on to the captain, “Sir, they suggest you change course.” The captain was furious. He turned and yelled, “You tell them I am a captain and I'm ordering them to change course, 20 degrees hard now. Don't those fools know we are on a collision course?” The message was sent. Then the reply came back. “I'm an ensign second class, and I suggest you change course now.” The captain was near spitting, and the light was fast approaching. “You tell them I am the captain of a battleship and they'd better obey my orders immediately!” The message was sent. Back came the reply, “I'm a lighthouse.” And the battleship turned.

This is a funny story that helps us see that it is important to be open to points of view that are beyond what we know. This is not always easy because we tend to believe in things that make sense to us and our experiences. To look beyond where we are is not always easy, yet it is essential for continued growth in life and in faith. How do we stay open to new possibilities and thoughts from God and from other people? How do we leave the door open to our hearts and minds without losing our center and our integrity? How do we open ourselves to new ideas without being wishy washy?

I believe that the key to this is practicing genuine humility in life. Genuine humility is not about having a low self-esteem where we think whatever we know and say is not really worthwhile. This kind of humility is not about being weak or having no strong convictions and commitments. True humility is about the ability to be open to new ways of seeing and doing without feeling threatened in the process. It is about trusting that God speaks to us in new ways all the time and we have to be open to receive these new gifts. Our Bible story for today is about Jesus challenging his disciples and followers to practice this kind of humility. In this passage from Luke 18, Jesus tells a shocking parable about two men who went to pray. The shock comes to us when we see that the person who is supposedly a terrible person is the one who is truly open to God's guidance and revelation. The first man, a Pharisee, is portrayed as someone who is self-righteous. This would have been shocking to the people at the time because Pharisees were seen as the good religious leaders in Jesus' time. Unlike the stereotypes we tend to have of them, Pharisees, like Jesus, had a passion for the renewal of Israel and getting away from the exploitation and domination systems of the Roman Empire and the religious leadership of the temple. They were “the good guys” in those times. The tax collector in the story represented those who were resented by the people of Israel at the time. The actual translation for the Greek word *telones* is actually

toll collector and not just a tax collector. Toll collectors in those times were in a way worse than tax collectors. Tolls were collected for a variety of things such as using certain roads, selling your produce in the market, fishing, and exchanging money for Temple coins. The people who collected the tolls were paid very little but it was legal for them to extort and swindle money from poor peasants by overcharging the tolls. This would have been a “legal graft.” Toll collectors were the worst case scenario of tax collectors!

So, the parable shocks us by showing us how the unexpected happens in the kingdom of God. The normally “bad” person, the toll collector, is the person who is truly humble and open to God, while the normally “good” person, the Pharisee, is the one who is arrogant and closed to God. This parable was supposed to shock people to realize that it is not enough for the kingdom of God to have acts of devotion. What is truly important is the openness of our hearts to the love of God with humility knowing that the unexpected does happen in the kingdom of God. The transformation which Jesus talked about was something that would transform our whole lives to being open to grace and new ways of love and life. It turns our worlds upside down. Faith is not about having a good set of beliefs and some moral actions and values to go with it. Faith is not about ensuring that we have a good spot in heaven. It does not make us better than others. It does not put us above making mistakes. It does not even make us more special. Faith is about the continual opening of our lives to God’s loving presence. It is about living each moment as an opportunity for love and growth.

If we allow the love of God to transform our hearts, we would find ourselves more open to others. This does not mean that we accept whatever people do or say to us. But it would mean being open to seeing others as children of God even when we disagree with them. In his book, *Open Mind, Open Heart: The Contemplative Dimension of the Gospel Heart*, Thomas Keating writes, “Practice unconditional acceptance of others. This practice is especially powerful in quieting the emotions of the utility appetite: fear, anger, courage, hope, and despair. By accepting other people unconditionally, you discipline the emotions that want to get even with others or to get away from them. You allow people to be who they are with all their idiosyncrasies and with the particular behavior that is disturbing you. The situation gets more complicated when you feel an obligation to correct someone. If you correct someone when you are upset, you are certain to get nowhere. This arouses the defenses of others and gives them a handle for blaming the situation on you. Wait until you have calmed down and then offer correction out of genuine concern for them.”

Think about this in the political scene during this election season. All of our political campaigns are run based on fear or hate of the other side. Humility is seen as a weakness and if one does run negative ads, then that person is sure to lose. This, of course, is the worst example of how we can be closed to God and to others. Even in our daily lives, you can see many examples of the same kind of attitude. Think of the driver that cuts others off in order to save one extra minute because they think that they are the only ones in a hurry. Think of how we judge someone looking or smelling badly. Think of the arguments family members get into without anyone truly listening to the

hurts, ideas or concerns shared. Think of the bully at school who tries to cover up their own insecurities by abusing others. Think of the ways we judge our bodies, our careers, our children, our homes, and our cars in comparison with others.

True humility is about knowing that we are adequate just as we are. We are not better than others. Yet, we are not worse than them either. Others are not better than us. Yet, they are not worse than us either. This kind of humility is grounded in the love of Christ and in knowing that we are created in the image of God.

Last spring, a very diverse group of more than 100 religious leaders signed a Civility Covenant, which states, in brief, that they will:

1. Be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry.
2. Respect each other in our common humanity, particularly in how we speak to each other.
3. Disagree respectfully, without falsely impugning the other's motives, attacking the other's character, or questioning the other's faith.
4. Be neither arrogant nor boastful in our beliefs.
5. Be mindful how we treat each other, in pursuit of the common good.
6. Pray for our political leaders, those with whom we agree, and those with whom we disagree.
7. Pray for one another, those with whom we agree and those with whom we disagree.

Imagine our world and how different it would be if people truly practiced these principles in their daily lives!

During the American Revolutionary War a company of soldiers under the command of a captain was building a fort out of a pile of heavy logs. While wrestling with a log which was to form the capstone and was really too heavy for the men to handle, the captain kept yelling at his men "heave it up", while he himself stood by with his hands on his hips. Suddenly a stranger in everyday clothing rode up on horseback, and seeing the soldiers sweating and struggling with the log, he stopped and asked the captain why he was not helping his men. "I AM AN OFFICER" was the reply. With that the stranger leapt off his horse, took off his coat, and helped the men put the heavy log in place. Then, as he was about to ride away, he said to the captain "Next time you need help, just call on me. My name is George Washington and I am Commander In Chief of The United States Army!"

The parable of the Pharisee and toll collector challenges us today to see that according to our faith in Christ the values of our world of power and righteous need to be turned upside down. Those who are truly righteous are the ones who are truly humble and open to God and to others. May we always live by the upside down values of the kingdom of God. Amen.