

# 50,000 Tutors

Gospel of Luke 18:9-14

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*He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: <sup>10</sup>Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax-collector. <sup>11</sup>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. <sup>12</sup>I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income." <sup>13</sup>But the tax-collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" <sup>14</sup>I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.'*

*Gospel of Luke 18:9-14, NRSV*

God, I thank you that I am not like.....Mr. Donald Manuel Paradis of Coeur D'Alene, Idaho.<sup>1</sup>

I learned about Donal Paradis from a NYT Op Ed piece by Bob Herbert. And when I think of Donald Paradis, I thank God that I am here in the community of St. John's and not, like Mr. Paradis, alone, in jail...for approximately 21 years...fourteen of which were spent on death row. And the very same judge who sentenced the 52-year-old Mr. Paradis to death in 1981 for the murder of 19 year old Kimberly Anne Palmer, released him from custody just over two decades later.

Now, Mr. Paradis was probably no angel, but then who is? And as it turns out, Mr. Paradis is no murderer either. Despite his death sentence, and appearances to the contrary notwithstanding, he is no more a murderer than you or I or the judge who sentenced him....although that may have been debatable if the unjust death sentence had been carried out.

Amazingly, the facts of his case are not that complicated. The victim was killed in Mr. Paradis' house. But Mr. Paradis was not home at the time. And although he did help move the body to another location, there were two much more likely suspects, who later did actually confess to the crime - which should theoretically have cleared Mr. Paradis. But once a state execution is set on track, it is very difficult to derail. Once one is branded a murderer, it is very difficult to convince anyone otherwise. So I will say again, thank you God, that we are not like Donald Manuel Paradis.

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<sup>1</sup> This account is taken from a New York Times Op Ed piece written by Bob Herbert on April 12, 2001.

For, Mr. Paradis' court-appointed lawyer, William Brown, had never actually studied criminal law. He had never tried a felony case. In fact, he had never even tried a case before a jury. And so his entire pitch to save the life of his dependant defendant lasted a mere three hours. God, did we mention how grateful we are that we are not like Donald Paradis?

The medical examiner on whose testimony the case against Mr. Paradis rested, was eventually fired for an array of improper procedures. He was convicted of performing private autopsies in state facilities, selling human tissue for profit, and to top it all off - saving human blood for use in his own deficient garden. Wow! Thank you Jesus, that we do not walk in this poor man's shoes.... Donald Paradis's shoes, that is....for the medical examiner, the trial lawyer, and the police department - not exactly CSI material - but none of them spent 21 years in prison, unjustly...none of them were branded a murderer, unjustly...and while all of them may well have given a tenth of their income to the church and fasted and attended services every Sunday morning in Coeur D'Alene Idaho, none of them is really as righteous as they may appear or claim to be....at least none is any more righteous than Mr. Paradis is a murderer.

This morning's parable which stands alone in the Gospel of Luke seems, on the surface, a pretty trite tale. The man in power, the Pharisee, exults himself, he turns God's gifts into idolatrous love, and as a result of his arrogance and ingratitude is scorned and left "unjustified," that is, not likely to score salvation. He will ultimately be humbled for his high-mindedness. Meanwhile, the marginalized tax collector acknowledges his fragility and flawed nature, humbles himself, and will, in the long run, be exulted and embraced by heaven. The lesson seems pretty clear cut. But there are a number of deeper, richer facets to this clear cut gem of a parable.

First, there is the irony of the Pharisee who cannot open his heart to receive the gift of God's grace because he is so busy counting his self-made blessings. He fasts, he tithes....and by the way, let me say that this is just one of the more inconvenient reversals of expectations in our scripture - I mean, to have the clearly deficient character, the one who doesn't get Jesus' point, be the one who gives a tenth of his income to the church....and then to put that reading at the start of our stewardship season - as if to say that tithing will not automatically yield a "Get into Heaven Free Card" - which we know is absolutely not true! Just to be clear, I can tell you as the Associate Rector here at St. John's, that you will get into heaven by tithing....probably.....maybe....possibly.....but apparently we just need to do some other stuff as well - although that is apparently not true either. For none of the things that the Pharisee does to make himself seem righteous, have the intended result. His self-righteous deed serve rather as a shield that ultimately blinds his eyes to God's abundant generosity and love, and blocks the way of God's grace. He is so full of himself that he cannot be

open to God. The lesson here is that we cannot *do* anything to exult ourselves. We can only *be* exulted by God.

The second rich facet shows us that a dangerous part of exulting ourselves is the tendency we have to judge others in the process. And as we can see in the case of Donald Paradis, judging others is a very dicey endeavor. And in this morning's reading, the Pharisee arrogantly reminds God of the shortcomings of the rest of God's children....as though God needs another critic. As if to say to God, geeze louse you created some real rotten apples out there.....just in case you had not noticed, Almighty Creator. But, thanks a million that *I* have had the strength and *I* have employed the good sense and *I* have worked successfully enough to raise myself above them. The implication is that despite the weakness of some, many ,most (we can each choose our degree of arrogance) of God's children, a few of us are good enough to overcome our naturally created deficits.....and the rest are, sadly, no better off than Mr. Paradis.....thieves, adulterers, rogues, tax collectors, murderers....a society of reprobates.

But this brings us to what I think is the heart of this parable, or at least among its brightest facets. And that is that self-exultation is not a solitary affair.....it is a community affair. Self-exultation cannot be done in a vacuum. When we exult ourselves, we are not just blowing smoke up our own skirts, as the saying goes – we are not just promoting our own balony – we are not just lifting ourselves to unsolicited heights. But we are, in the process, necessarily denigrating and demeaning others. After all, its no fun being exulted without a fray of turkeys above which to stand. Self-exultation is, in the last analysis, primarily about diminishing others....raising our own profile at the expense of the profiles of others.

And so I think that the big point of this parable is not really about gratitude or worthiness or judgment, it is not just about exulting ourselves or humbling ourselves for the sake of our own salvation. It is rather about how we see ourselves in relationships, how we work and play with others.....it is about how we are to be in community. It is all about community.

And community is what we are all about here today. Today we celebrate the 125<sup>th</sup> anniversary of this gorgeous space. It is the home base for our community of faith that has welcomed and nurtured generations of faithful souls who have come together to live into God's vision for us here in Jamaica Plain and in the wider world. We are here today to celebrate the wonder of this community as it has blossomed and continues to blossom in this place. A community that has been our way, for generations, of living into God's hope for us in our lives and in our world.

As Anne said so beautifully in her sermon last week, Jesus could sit and eat with sinners of all persuasions because his message is not about how any one of us ranks and rates in this world. It's not about who is righteous and who is not in this world. His message is rather about how we treat each other in community. In our Holy Scriptures there is no mention of the person of God....there are only the people of God. God could care less about how each of us stacks up against the lot, or how we fare individually with respect to our socially constructed yardsticks – whether we are financially successful, or morally chaste, or socially revered, or politically correct, or even religiously affiliated – that is, of course, not say that we should not shoot for all those things – but that is not where the treasure of heaven lies. The treasure lies in our community relationships, in the Body of Christ, where each member treats every other member as God's dearly beloved, with whom God is thoroughly well pleased.

Have any of you seen the movie Akheela and the Bee? If you have not, I highly recommend it. If there were a study guide for this morning's Gospel reading, I think this film would be chapter one. The movie is about a young African American girl named Akheela. She lives what many of us might call a fairly socially disadvantaged life. Her father died when she was 6. Her mother works several jobs to make ends meet for her family of four children, one of whom is a teenaged boy who hangs out with an unsavory street gang. Akheela goes to a grossly underfunded urban school where they are hard pressed to support basic classes let alone nurture and encourage extra-curricular activities such as training and coaching for students who participate in competitive spelling bees...students such a Akheela.

Akheela is not a particularly good student, but she is an outstanding speller. This is her gift. And though she has no formal support system and initially her mother seems to thwart her at every turn, she wins, almost by accident, the district spelling bee in the spring of her 5<sup>th</sup> grade year – which buys her an unlikely ticket to the regional bee in the fall. Now you'll have to see the movie to get the gorgeous details, but the upshot of this story is that the gift and the dream of this little girl, without an advantage to her name, without a reason to hope in the world, humbled to the nth degree by birth and circumstance, both builds a unique community of steadfast souls, and then rises on their wings to a unanimous victory for each and every one in her realm. Because she is lacking in the usual systems of support, she builds a community of atypical tutors who challenge and nourish her, and claim a poignant stake in her success. When Akheela loses her volunteer tutor and cannot afford a "proper" tutor, her mother tells her that she need not worry - she is surrounded by tutors, 50,000 tutors, all of whom are wanting and willing to help her reach her potential. And so this little girl engages a wide range of unlikely suspects, friends, neighbors, mail carriers, grocery clerks, playground attendants, gang members, and many more who band

together to help Akheela reach, what turns out to be, their collective goal. This movie completely denounces the very notion, the value, and the virtue of individual achievement. The glory is not in the winning, but in the working together, the collective tutorial of a vibrant community. The victory is clearly in the fabric, not in any single thread. The prize is that no one person is exulted or demeaned, but that all are lifted on the collective commitment to each other's success.

I have been fortunate enough over these past three years to know what this kind of community high feels like. We have our own version of this story happening here at St. John's. We might call it Annie and the Basement – but it has all of the same salient elements as Akheela and the Bee, except of course the element of direct competition. Although, I would argue that the stakes here were every bit as high. Against all odds our scrappy little community has raised almost three times the diocesan estimate of our capital fundraising capability. And we have a whole team of highly committed, diversely talented folks who have volunteered outrageous amounts of their time and talent to carefully and mindfully tend every step of this process for the benefit of the whole community. And when we are finished, which will be in the amazingly near future, we will have accomplished the Herculean feat of regenerating and renovating our space, and securing our future – together. We will have taken this leap of faith – together. And we will have landed on the other side of what was a terrifyingly foreboding black hole of an undertaking several years ago – together. No one here has not contributed to our accomplishment. No one here is not a part of the legacy that we are honoring as it has been passed down through generations of our St. John's ancestors, and that we are now passing on to future generations of our St. John's children. We are a vital link in the continuum of this vital and vibrant community. And we have secured that link – together.

I would like to leave you with a quote that was hanging on the wall of one of Akheela's coaches. It is often attributed to Nelson Mandella, but it is actually from a book by Marianne Williamson called *Return to Love*. And I think it is a great commentary on how we each live into community – how we can shine as individuals without exulting ourselves as lone rangers like the Pharisee, or leaving our most vulnerable brothers and sisters alone to fend for themselves, like Donald Paradis.

*Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness, that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented and fabulous? Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small doesn't serve the world. We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It's not just in some of us; it's in everyone. And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others.*

Onward together!

Amen.

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