

Becoming

In my first year of seminary, two of us were assigned to work on skid row in Boston.

Specifically, we were assigned to what was claimed to be the largest flop house in the country, a place called Pine Street Inn.

Pine Street Inn had hundreds of beds and served even more meals, twice a day.

But the thing that always stuck with me is the very thing that's at work in today's gospel lesson.

This oh so human urge to compare ourselves to each other!

Because, when I talked story with the drug addicts, they always said something like, "Well, I know I stick needles in my arms in filthy bathrooms, but at least I'm not like those drunks who drink cheap wine and throw up on themselves in a ditch."

While the alcoholics would say something like: "Well, I know I drink cheap wine and throw up on myself in a ditch, but at least I'm not like those addicts who shoot up in filthy bathrooms!"

This need we have to compare ourselves with one another, it infects everyone, and it infects just about everything we do.

From our politics ("He may be corrupt and ignorant and vile, but at least he's not Hillary Clinton!") to our workplaces ("Why does she get promoted when I work twice as hard?") to our home life ("Why is my

brother so bone-headed while I'm so reasonable?"), comparing ourselves with others is probably our most favorite past-time.

And yet, as St Paul constantly reminds us, we are each of us indispensable, unique and precious parts of the body of Christ.

So that each of us has a profoundly necessary and irreplaceable role to play in helping to complete God's dreams for this good creation.

And because of that, comparing ourselves to one another makes no more sense than an ear comparing itself to the big toe, or an eyebrow to a knee joint.

So what about our gospel lesson today, one that, at first glance seems to be a simple caution against looking down on others, and a warning against hypocrisy?

Well, as with all things Jesus, I'm pretty sure there's more going on than just that.

Because the Pharisee here really is a good guy.

He's disciplined, generous and pays attention to the very thing God gave to the Jewish people: the Law, that roadmap to creating a just and compassionate society.

In fact, this Pharisee does even more than is required.

Fasting not just once a year as the law requires, but twice a week!

Tithing, not just on some of his income, as the law requires, but on all of it!

If he were an Episcopalian, every Rector in town would be hunting him down, dragging him into their congregation, putting a pledge card in his hand and offering him the next vacancy as senior warden!

On the other hand, here's our tax collector, who, far from being the rightful object of our pity, really is a scalawag.

Tax collectors work for the occupying Romans.

They steal from their own people.

They are in many ways the loan sharks of the day.

But what the tax collector realizes, what the Pharisee can't see, is that no matter our station in life, no matter our track record, no matter our good or foul deeds, we are all in this life together; and we are all desperately in need of God's good grace.

Because "as human beings, we are all separated from God, from the source of our being.

We are **all of us** wandering in a world of shadows, mistaking the outward appearance of people and things for reality.

And yet something is pressing us to reach out, beyond the shadows, to face the truth, the reality, the inner meaning of our lives, and so to be found by God..."Bede Griffiths, *Going Out Of Oneself*, Parabola, 1999, 24-5. (paraphrased).

What the Pharisee misses, what the tax collector seems to grasp, is that while "there may be different degrees of being lost, different degrees of

responding to God's invitation, ..., being lost is the truth of our situation, this bittersweet truth that makes us all, no matter our circumstances, sisters and brothers." J. Shea, *The Relentless Widow*, 300 (paraphrased).

"Here's an image.

The young woman who lives in the Port Authority Bus Terminal is a crack addict; she lies, cheats, and steals.

She knows how to manipulate people.

At twenty-six, she's wasted her education and lost several jobs.

When she is asleep in her blanket on the floor, there is no way for a passerby to know whether or not she's trying to kick her habit and better herself.

Yet, she constantly finds that bus passengers put one dollar, two dollars, even twenty-dollar bills into her blanket while she's asleep.

Here's another image.

Jesus stoops down to us in our miserable condition, bringing the gifts of new life.

He doesn't ask us what we're doing to make ourselves better; he just gives the gift.

He doesn't ask if we're working to turn ourselves around; he doesn't ask for a receipt; he simply puts redemption into our blanket." Fleming Rutledge, *And God Spoke to Abraham: Preaching from the Old Testament* (paraphrased).

And isn't that the truth that our Pharisee today misses?

Isn't that the truth I miss when I find myself frustrated and even angry with some of our neighbors who refuse shelter, refuse what I define as "help", refuse to change what, to my mind, is an abysmal living situation?

The scandal of the gospels is that God meets us most often in that which is small and odd and vulnerable.

Whether we meet Jesus in the prisoner we visit or in the child laying in a barn in Bethlehem, what the gospels proclaim is not the easily grasped notion that God is great and powerful, but the mind-bending truth that God comes to us as someone small, as someone vulnerable.

And if we wish to know this God, that's what we need to become too.

Which is not an easy task for independent, educated, "pull yourself up by your own bootstraps" folks like us!

Perhaps I need to rethink my reaction to our neighbors who seem to not get with the program, and to pay more attention to how often I myself am out of step with God's program.

Perhaps Dorothy Day has it right when she says that "the sermon on the mount ('blessed are the poor, the meek, the peacemakers ...') is really an examination of conscience - to see how far we go."

Today's parable is a stark reminder that the "nature of God is to pour grace into anyone empty enough to receive it.

That God's unconditional love starts pouring out at the very moment I let go of judging others; it pours out the moment I release my need to justify and defend myself." Shea, Id at 300, paraphrased.

Only an open hand, it seems — the symbol of our solidarity with each other - can receive God's grace.

Only when we allow ourselves to be who we truly are; beloved, unique, indispensable members of the Body of Christ, only then can God be for us who God truly is: our gentle creator, our lover, our friend. Id.

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