

PRIDE



Luke 18:10 "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. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.' 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!'"

The most common word for sin in the New Testament is the Greek word, "*hamartia*," which surprisingly is an archery term, that literally translates "to miss the mark." In archery, one aims for the bull's eye, but most often misses the mark. All sin seems to have something of this character about it, of missing the mark. We are usually aiming for the right things, but often fail to reach them. Sin appears to be a frustration or a misdirection of our genuine human needs and impulses, which often simply fails to find the right target. It is all a bit like someone stumbling about in the dark, who upon reaching the

elusive light switch, realizes how many things they had knocked over in the search and what a mess they had made of it all.

Perhaps this understanding of sin is nowhere more evident than with the sin of Pride, exemplified in today's Gospel, in a story about a devout Pharisee who trusted in himself that he was righteous and then regarded others with contempt. Traditionally Pride is the first among the seven deadly sins; the one which caused the angels to fall from heaven, and Adam and Eve to fall from grace. Yet pride is unique among the seven deadly sins in that it is also often seen as a virtue. My mother, for example, often told me how proud she was of me, or else she told me to take some pride in myself, about how I looked, or how I acted, or about what other people would think of me. I was encouraged to publicly declare that "I have my pride". Such a statement is seen as a badge of honor by many. But I noticed that my mother never encouraged me in any of the other deadly sins. I was never encouraged to publicly admit that "I have my sloth, or my envy," or "that I have my lust."

The other deadly sins are ugly and repulsive in a way that Pride does not seem to be. A truly gluttonous person, for instance, is not pleasant company at a dinner party, neither is someone with unbridled lust. But someone with pride is often a lovely guest. For some forms of pride: pride of family, of culture, of country, are viewed in our society as generally commendable and even honorable. The U.S. Marines unabashedly advertised that they were looking for "The Few, The Proud, the Brave." Thus, there is at the least a certain ambiguity about the

sin of Pride that distinguishes it from the other deadly sins. If someone calls you a "proud person", it is sometimes a compliment in the way that is never flattering if someone calls you "greedy or envious."

Pride taken to the extreme, of course, is an ugly sight; think of those who are excessively proud, those pompous individuals, trusting only in themselves that they are righteous and regarding others with contempt, like the Pharisee in today's Gospel. You know the kind of people I am talking about, who are continually trying to impress upon us how well educated they are, or how broadly experienced, or how much money or power they have, or who their friends are and how influential they are; or even how pious they are, how they fast and tithe, all the while going about belittling others as thieves and rogues and adulterers. Now it is not that these people are necessarily wrong about what they say. They are often very smart or pious or have important friends and lots of money and influence. There is, however, an unwillingness on their part to *also* acknowledge their own weaknesses and their own faults, their shortcomings and human frailties; their sin, how they too have often missed the mark. The excessively proud often portray themselves without blemish in some way, while they nonetheless see and declare the faults of others all too clearly. Sound familiar? They talk only of their virtue, and of others, of their faults. Yet we all know that weakness, frailty, and defect are a part of all human nature and the denial of these qualities in oneself is pernicious. Acknowledging our human weaknesses is always a more honest

portrayal of who we really are, though we seem so reluctant to do so.

So, we arrive at today's Gospel, where that Pharisee, that leader in the community, that righteous man, stands before the altar and thanks God that he is not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. In fact, our Pharisee is a model citizen to be followed; he fasts twice a week; he gives a tithe of all his income; he prays regularly. It would be a very different story if he hadn't criticized the others, and if he only admitted that he too wasn't perfect, acknowledging his own shortcomings. For he seems without fault in the story, while the tax collector openly acknowledges that he is a sinner and averts his eyes and beats his breast in awareness that he is not worthy to plead before the altar of God, as none of us really is.

Now I once heard a modern version of today's parable, where the chief rabbi and the chief tax collector took turns standing before the altar of God beating their chests and declaring what miserable sinners they were, like the tax collector in today's Gospel. Then just as they were leaving, the janitor of that synagogue appears out of the shadows, and thinking he is alone, stands before the same altar, beats his chest, and declares before God what a miserable sinner he is. But the chief rabbi observing this from the doorway, comments to the chief tax collector, saying, "Look, look, look who thinks he's a miserable sinner!" Sometimes we can take pride even in our miserable sinfulness, in our humility!

Indeed, I think, that false humility is as dangerous as pride itself. Think for a moment about those falsely humble persons who are forever beating their breasts and lamenting how unworthy or incapable they are, often as if they were trying to convince themselves more than us. Such persons are impossible to compliment or to help, or to say nice things to, because they are always correcting us, letting us know just how rotten or incompetent they really are, and thus how wrong we are in our praises. And they themselves sometimes become pathetic figures, struggling to deny their own self-worth, but of course, if they really believed they were of no worth, there would be no need for a struggle or their persistence.

For in the end, it is an absolutely basic human instinct to want or need to be of personal significance, that we want to feel that we have some value as individuals; that we matter as persons, that there is something good about each one of us. This is a fundamental recognition of our human worth, of the image of God that we all possess within ourselves. This is the target we are all shooting our arrows at. No suggestion whatsoever of 'sin' ought to be attached to this basic human instinct. We would no more label all eating as gluttony than we should label this instinct in itself as pride. To deny this basic human instinct, to denigrate our personal significance, is at the very least foolish, like trying to live without food, and at worst, it can become sick and deadly. People who belittle themselves so often and so much are guilty of a sort of spiritual anorexia, where little or nothing is left of their personal worth.

A sense of self-worth is a necessary Christian virtue. Jesus' command to love our neighbor is, for example, dependent upon our love of self. Self-hatred or indifference to oneself is a perversion. And this is the very difference, I think, between the self-denial of Christianity and the self-negation of other Eastern religions. A strong ego is necessary in order to deny ourselves, in order to be able to give ourselves away, in order to sacrifice ourselves. The person who hates himself or herself or who has negated his or her own worth has nothing of value left to give away or to deny or to sacrifice. They have nothing of worth to offer to God; and they end up denying the very goodness of their own creation.

The sin of Pride is simply an exaggeration or distortion of this basic sense of self-worth. It is a missing of the target. It is not the notion of self-worth itself which is sinful. In the end, we must be able to acknowledge both our self-worth *and* our shortcomings. We must be both like the Pharisee and the tax-collector in today's Gospel. We need a balance between the two. We must be able to be honest about ourselves. For when we are honest about ourselves, we can see all too clearly our own faults and frailties and are then not likely to exaggerate our worth or be condescending with others.

So, what is the remedy to keep oneself from falling into either of these two extremes of false humility or sinful pride? I think the answer is humor, an ability and a willingness to laugh, not at others, but to laugh at ourselves. For both the prideful and falsely humble are all too serious about themselves, and

about the importance of their actions, for good or ill. Yet the world does not center on us. In fact, we are a small and almost insignificant part of it. It is a disproportionate perception of our own worth that is the root of Pride and the beginning of our fall, of our losing touch with reality. True humility in the end is less a virtue in itself, and more just the courage to face reality about ourselves. Humor makes that reality a little easier. So let us always be sure that we are among those who can and will easily laugh at ourselves, while at the same time struggling to be the good people God has called us to be, and to do the good works that God has given us talents and treasures to do. AMEN.