

Cheap mercy (Luke 18:9-14)

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October 20, 2016

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The trappings of religion can cement you into places and postures that do not facilitate growth. This parable of Jesus is pretty cut and dry: vilify the Pharisee and venerate the tax collector. The assault on religious sensibilities is palpable. We are duly cautioned not to leave God's house intoxicated by our so-called clean and sanitized lives. When we converse with God without spiritual honesty, we reduce prayer to rhetorical gymnastics.

The tax collector stands at a distance, beating his breast. But there is something divine about this distance. He is willing to stare in the mirror and name what he sees: a flawed human being with a hunger for grace.

Tax collectors were considered enemies of Israel, because they exploited their own people in the name of the empire. So it is safe to assume more than a few people wonder what's behind this man's contrition. His remorse perhaps buds from the infertile soil of his professional life--meeting the demands of life at the expense of other people.

The Pharisee's litany is shortsighted, but it demonstrates an understanding of the dastardliness of the tax collector's life. He is grateful to God that someone else has done things he hasn't.

What does Mr. Publican do once he arrives at home? Guilt without growth is trivial. It is not enough to announce your sins without a sincere hunger for change. Remorse is not a good alibi for spiritual stagnation. Self-deprecating inaction is not a spiritual

maxim to be espoused. Humility before God and honesty about self should drive us to new vistas of productivity, creativity, and love.

Guilt is not enough on a national scale, either. We need a concerted shift from apology to action, from guilt to justice. The redemption of America is only possible through naming sins and undoing generations of damage. White guilt has to translate into black-brown justice.

We cheapen mercy when there is no forward movement, nothing percolating at the inner recesses of our soul, drawing us to revolutionize our life. Ultimately this parable is not about the Pharisee or the tax collector. It's about the hearers, those gathered around Jesus with varying motives. We can proclaim our unworthiness, but this cannot be the permanent address of our spirituality. It's just the first step.