

According to Mark . . . March 2020

My friend Peter Marty is one of the people who help me grow in ministry matters and my personal faith. I think he has some lessons for us all as we enter into the season of Lent, and contemplate our individual and group paths of Christian discipleship of humility and repentance, I'd like to share some of that wisdom this month.

The Orthodox church celebrates the Sunday of the Publican and the Pharisee (Luke 18:9-14) 3 weeks before Lent begins each year. The Pharisee in the scripture doesn't pray as much as he tells the world of his own righteousness: "God, I thank you that I'm 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." The tax collector stands to the side, asking only for mercy. So the Pharisee is trying to say to everyone that he is more moral than others, and this is told because Jesus' audience for this parable is "some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt."

The behavior of the Pharisee reflects what we see more and more of these days, where folks will advertise their own righteousness by expressing moral outrage at an issue or a person in a bid to show that they are kind and decent in holding these beliefs. The unspoken corollary is that if we don't agree with them, too, then we are neither kind nor decent in our dissent. Posturing like this is not talking with someone, but talking at them, and it reflects an age-old desire to gather people to our side when we feel threatened or attacked. Facebook and Twitter only help magnify this phenomenon where we don't have a dialogue as much as a broadcast to the world about our need to be right.

We want to be good. We want to stand up for moral causes. But it's another matter to stand up and tell others how good we are at the expense of our fellow persons around us. So while moral outrage is done by all of us at some time or other, we have to remember that it should also obligate us to do some kind of action that brings hope and healing to or through God's beloved into the world

But we need to be cautious that we don't just lob a grenade at those whom we accuse of being self-righteous...what if they have a real issue that demands our genuine attention as disciples? Are we in danger of our own dose of self-righteousness? Where do we engage and pray to God for mercy in our discernments, and how do we again forgive those who have forgotten their discipleship pathway that we will love them even if they hurt us? In order to know, we are required to enter into relationship, dialogue, covenant, mercy and compassion, even as we call out bombastic actions or speech.

The Pharisee's problem isn't his own righteousness; it's his smugness, trust in his own goodness, and a comparison between himself and others that Jesus calls out. So this Lenten season, let's not be all too quick to identify that we're not like the Pharisee (or is our own vanity and righteous self in the way). What we might need is more distance from the virtue-seekers, less self-promotion, and a posture of the tax collector: We are going to have a very tough row to hoe without God's mercy.

Pastor Mark