

2007-10-24

open source spirituality: turning the world upside down

<https://hdl.handle.net/2144/45>

"Downloaded from OpenBU. Boston University's institutional repository."

open source spirituality: turning the world upside down

Jack Ammerman

Oct 24, 2007

Preached at the Boston University School of Theology

Luke 18:9-14

But he also spoke this parable for the sake of certain ones who have confidence in themselves that they are just and who despise the rest.

"Two men went up to the temple to pray, the one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying these things: 'O God, I thank you because I am not just like the rest of humanity: swindlers, unjust ones, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice during the week. I tithe everything I acquire.'

But the tax collector, stopping far off, did not even want to lift his eyes toward heaven, but instead he was beating his breast saying, 'O God be merciful to me, the sinner!'

I assure you, this one (the tax collector) went down to his house as one whose prayer God heard. Were you perhaps thinking of the former? Because all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humbled themselves will be exalted."

I try to avoid preaching from scripture passages like the gospel lesson for today. The way Luke sets up the parable in verse 9 makes it impossible to preach. It's bad enough that we are conditioned to "boo and hiss" when the Pharisee walks on stage, but Luke tells us the punch line first. It might preach better if we just leave out verse 9. It's really a later addition anyway. What Jesus said doesn't really start until verse 10.

Maybe we should leave out verse 14, too. Everyone is going to identify with the tax collector anyway. Who in their right mind would identify with someone as openly arrogant as the Pharisee? But then the story leaves us asking "So What?" And we end up having to preach against praying, fasting, tithing and clean living. That's going to be a risky sermon to preach. Maybe we should preach on the Old Testament lesson.

Ultimately, though, verse 14 hooked me a couple weeks ago and I haven't been able to turn it loose. So while it may not preach, I'm compelled to wrestle this text like Jacob wrestling the angel, until it either gives up some message for me, perhaps for us, or I limp away marveling that my life has been spared. By virtue of your presence here today, you have the fortune (or misfortune) of being witness to this struggle. While some over there on the side are already laying odds against me, perhaps the rest of you will join me in the struggle, through your encouragement, or even leaping into the fray.

We have to work really hard today to set aside preconceived notions that get in the way of understanding the actors in this little drama. We are accustomed to thinking about the Pharisees as the bad guys. While Jesus did frequently seem to be in conflict with them, this one doesn't appear to be particularly evil. In fact, quite to the contrary, he appears to be quite holy. While he seems to us quite arrogant, his prayer sounds much like the liturgical formula outlined in Deuteronomy 26. When we understand that the Pharisee movement was a "holiness" movement, we begin to gain insight into this man.

Jerome Neyrey writes of two covenant types in the Bible, the covenant with Moses and the covenant with Abraham and David. Each type of covenant reflects how God was perceived. "With Moses, God acted in 'holiness' to gather a special people as his own, which he separated from the nations and made holy by the law. This tends to be an exclusive covenant. With Abraham and David, God acted in 'mercy' to elect unlikely people to receive blessings and promises by grace; this covenant was perceived as being inclusive in nature."

What we know about the Pharisees is that they were a "holiness" movement. They were type A covenanters who worked to preserve the covenant with God by holy living. This holy living required a "separateness" that drew exclusive boundaries to maintain ritual purity. Mary Douglas, a British anthropologist, spoke of purity as a system of establishing symbolic boundaries. Rituals of purity are mechanisms to mark boundaries, to identify what is correct and what is not, what fits and what doesn't, what belongs and what doesn't. Certainly this is true for the Pharisee.

One easy way to begin to understand the Pharisee's system of purity is to look at its opposite: DIRT! And it isn't hard to identify the dirt in this Pharisee's world.

'O God, I thank you because I am not just like the rest of humanity: swindlers, unjust ones, adulterers, or even like this tax collector'

No wonder he fasted and tithed more than required. He was afraid he might be contaminated. This man saw dirt everywhere he turned. Of all places, he was even confronted by dirt in the temple. There, standing far-off, but still in the temple, was the tax collector; ritually impure; evidence of the pollution that threatened on all sides.

While the Pharisee may have been one of the most honored members of the community, the tax collector was probably among the most despised. This man wasn't a chief tax collector, merely a cog in the government bureaucracy. A toll collector.... He probably wasn't rich. To survive, he had to charge higher taxes than people actually owed, but the chief tax collector got most of that. According to the holiness tradition of the Pharisees, the tax collector was ritually unclean. He had to go into the houses of unclean people, touch unclean objects, and handle unclean money.

His profession landed him firmly at the margins of society. He was colluding with the Roman oppressors, and the taxes required by the Roman government meant that the average person had difficulty paying the temple tax. The inability to pay the temple tax would certainly make holiness more difficult for the peasant to achieve.

Yet, this tax collector shows up at the temple; doesn't want to even raise his eyes to heaven to pray; seeks God's mercy. Unable to escape the government system, trapped at the margins of society, this tax collector knows he is unclean, unholy, and that he is not able to atone for himself. "O God, be merciful to me, the sinner." Or perhaps "Atonement for me, the sinner." Without other resource, he is dependent on God.

Now we know what happens. Jesus turns things upside down. Surely his listeners would have been shocked to discover that God heard the prayer of the tax-collector. God up righted him. God brought him into alignment with God. But new it would end that way. But we miss the point if we think that it was because the Pharisee bragged when he prayed and the tax collector asked for mercy.

When Luke talks about humility, he isn't talking about a spiritual or psychological attitude toward oneself or lack of boasting. You may remember that the maxim that ends this passage appears in Luke 14:11. Jesus gives guidance about seating arrangements:

14:8 When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not sit down at the place of honor, in case someone more distinguished than you has been invited by your host.

14:9 and the host who invited both of you may come and say to you, 'Give this person your place,' and then in disgrace you would start to take the lowest place.

14:11 For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."

Luke is talking about attitude toward the lowly and social position in relation to the lowly. Being humble is standing up and taking a less important seat. And in today's lesson, being humble is about breaking down the walls of ritual purity, Being humble is about letting in the likes of a tax collector. Being humble is about MERCY!!

Jesus is turning the world upside down. The Pharisee is standing in the middle of the temple, symbolic of the honor and power he believes rightfully belong to him. The Pharisee stands in the middle of the temple, assuming that is the center of God's kingdom. The Pharisee stands in the middle of the temple, assuming that he is the center of God's kingdom.

You see, for Jesus, social location isn't about how you feel. It's about the chair to sit in. For Jesus, social location is not about how often you tithe and fast, it's about the boundaries you draw to keep others out. For Jesus, social location isn't about how good you are, it's about who you stand next to in the temple.

At a basic level, we each have a set of assumptions that are so basic that they are like the air we breathe. It isn't that we never question them, we aren't even aware of them. But they shape the way we view the world. And for the Pharisee, they shape the way he looks at other people. The Pharisee looked around and all he could see was DIRT. The very people that Jesus came to include in the Kingdom were DIRT, POLLUTION, for the Pharisee. But Jesus is saying that the

center of the Kingdom is where the tax-collector stands, not where the Pharisee stands. One doesn't have to be "holy" in order to be in the Kingdom.

A few weeks ago I attended a symposium at MIT on "collective intelligence." We were looking at the phenomenon of groups of individuals doing things together that seem more intelligent than might be expected of the individuals working independently. An example of this is the open source software movement. We often assume that open source means "free." Often it is, but more accurately "Open Source" describes a set of principles and practices designed to promote not only access, but active participation in the creation of goods and knowledge. Wikipedia is a very visible example of an open source effort to create knowledge. It has created great debate, more because it has turned upside down our notion of how knowledge is created than for any inaccuracies that might appear. It breaks down the assumption that only "scholars" or "experts" can create knowledge. It tampers with our notion of purity. It breaks down the firmly established boundaries that stipulate who has the authority to create and interpret knowledge.

When I read the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector I was reminded of that discussion. Collective Intelligence and Open Source are about breaking down the boundaries, they are inclusive practices that invite any to use and participate. I've been wondering recently if we might think about collective spirituality, or "open source spirituality." What corporate spiritual practices might we implement that would be inclusive rather than exclusive. What spiritual practices might we do together that would include not just the people here, but those who go to spend Sunday mornings eating brunch at a Newbury St. restaurant, claiming to be spiritual but not religious, or the homeless woman who scavenges food from the dumpster in the back of the restaurant. What spiritual practices might we do together that would include them as our brothers and sisters, our teachers and spiritual guides, rather than objects of or scorn, our dirt? In what collective spiritual practices might we engage that would engender a corporate spirituality greater than the sum of our individual spirits? That might transcend the obvious and significant diversity we experience here at STH?

Nancy introduced me to a church, though they may not claim that label, in Belfast. They describe themselves as:

"Inhabiting a space on the outer edges of religious life, we are a Belfast-based collective who offer anarchic experiments in transformance art. Challenging the distinction between theist and atheist, faith and no faith our main gathering employs a cocktail of live music, visual imagery, soundscapes, theatre, ritual and reflection in an attempt to open up the possibility of a theodramatic event."

A collective, not simply a group of individuals

Intentionally inhabiting the edges of religious life, not standing in the middle of the temple.

Challenging distinctions, breaking down boundaries, turning the world upside down, not enforcing ritual purity.

I assure you, this one (the tax collector) went down to his house as one whose prayer God heard.

MERCY!

MERCY!

MERCY!

MERCY!

May it be so!

ⁱJerome H. Neyrey, "The symbolic universe of Luke-Acts : "they turn the world upside down",” in *The Social World of Luke-Acts* (1991), 296.

Jack Ammerman Page 1 10/23/2007