



Auckland Unitarian Church
Love beyond belief

It's hard to be a humble Unitarian

Clay Nelson © 15 November 2020

A year before jumping from Anglicanism to Unitarianism, I exchanged pulpits for three months with the priest in an Anglican Church in Barcelona. It was not easy for either me or the congregation, for they were of the evangelical branch of Anglicanism. They were quite certain of their conservative Christian beliefs and were none too happy that their vicar had foisted a heretic from New Zealand on them. It turns out they have Google in Spain too.

While I was respectful of where they were in their faith journey, I did not back off from sharing my progressive views in either my preaching or teaching. There was a mixed response. Some were gobsmacked. I had opened up a whole new world of understanding for them. Others just muttered the Catalan equivalent of codswallop under their breath. I was a threat to their certainty. Their faith was hard enough to cling to without me dinging it with difficult questions.

What ultimately won them over were my children's homilies. They found them entertaining, and were unaware I was chipping away at their certainty.

On my last Sunday I preached on the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector praying in the Temple as my *coup de grâce*. I chose it because Jesus sets an exquisite spiritual trap for his listeners, for we are the third character in this story. From Luke's Gospel (18:9-14):

[Jesus] told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. 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.'¹³ 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!'¹⁴ I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted."

The Pharisee Jesus presents is a straw man. In his arrogance and self-justification, he is easy to see as the one being condemned as he gives thanks for his faithfulness and for not being like the tax collector. But in truth we are the ones condemned. The trap is sprung as soon as we

think, “Thank God I’m not like the Pharisee.” We can be thankful to be Unitarians, but we should avoid the temptation to also thank the Spirit of Life that we ARE humble.

Being a Pharisee has come to mean being a hypocrite, but were they all that bad? The Pharisees began as a lay movement around 150 BCE. Their purpose and way of life was to maintain a level of purity, over and against the dominant Hellenist culture, as a way of preserving Jewish traditions. The Pharisees are the equivalent of good elders, stewards or deacons. They would be the ones sitting on church boards. They would be the one’s providing significant financial support for the work of the congregation. They were deeply devoted to their faith tradition.

In contrast to the Pharisees, tax collectors were deplorable. They were despised and hated, and not without cause. They were the instruments of economic oppression by the Roman Empire. They were collaborators and ritually unclean. They weren’t simply misunderstood. They were on the wrong side -- theologically, politically and economically. For the Pharisee in the parable the tax collector was the lowest form of life and, understandably, a tempting target for thanking God he was not like him.

However, when we as the audience choose to identify with the tax collector so we can eat with and hangout with Jesus, who liked to party with them, who would we be identifying with today? Drug dealing gang members or sex traffickers readily come to mind. That certainly gives one pause.

Given our preference, we would like to be righteous like the Pharisee and still enjoy table fellowship with Jesus. But that is not to be unless we share the tax collector’s self-understanding.

The tax collector comes to God in humility. Theologian Frederick Buechner describes humility as not thinking ourselves any worse or better than we are. The tax collector comes before God and acknowledges he is a slime ball. He doesn’t try to justify it. He doesn’t even promise to repent by quitting his job. What he does is ask for mercy. Mercy is how we translate the Hebrew word for “steadfast kindness.” He trusts that God’s steadfast kindness includes even the likes of him. It is that love that allows him to stand in the Temple and say essentially, “I may be a tax collector God, but I am your tax collector.” It is love that defines him, not what he does or doesn’t do.

When I’m preparing couples for marriage I tell them the moment they will know their marriage will last. It is when they stop saying to the other, “I love you because...” and start saying, “I love you in spite of...” We don’t deserve or earn this kind of steadfast kindness. We simply bask in it.

But having the humility to be the object of steadfast kindness without earning it is easier said than done. For as Mac Davis' old familiar song says:

Oh Lord it's hard to be humble,
When you're perfect in every way,
I can't wait to look in the mirror,
'cause I get better looking each day.

To know me is to love me,
I must be a hell of a man,
Oh Lord it's hard to be humble,
But I'm doin' the best that I can.

Henry Augustus Rowland, professor of physics at Johns Hopkins University, tried the best he could. He was once called as an expert witness at a trial. During cross-examination a lawyer demanded, "What are your qualifications as an expert witness in this case?"

The normally modest and retiring professor replied quietly, "I am the greatest living expert on the subject under discussion." Later a friend well acquainted with Rowland's disposition expressed surprise at the professor's uncharacteristic answer. Rowland explained, "Well, what did you expect me to say? I was under oath."

It may be hard to be humble but it is the one essential requirement to be one with humanity, as we are all going to end up humus. We are the ground of being from which a beloved community sprouts.

Humility understands that the delights, pains and needs of others are as important as our own. When we are humble, we laugh at our self-importance and sometimes, even, set it aside. We can see our own faults and the strengths of others, and we recognise how much we have been given, unearned.

Humility makes us aware of our personal limitations and the limitations of humanity. We acknowledge that there is much we do not know, that certainty is impossible, and that our understandings of the world are provisional at best. Humility brings us up short, opening us up to growth and love. Here is an example from history:

A rider came across some soldiers trying to move a heavy log without success. The corporal was standing by as the men struggled. The rider asked the corporal why he wasn't helping. The corporal replied, "I am the corporal; I give orders." The rider dismounted, went up and stood by the soldiers and as they were lifting the log, he helped them. With his help, the log got moved. The rider quietly mounted his horse and went to the corporal and said, "The next time your men need help, send for the Commander-in-Chief." After he left, the corporal and his men found out

the rider was George Washington.

Ultimately, humility gives us the gift of seeing the divine spark in the face of one another and even in our own when we look in the mirror. Something that is not possible when we are judging others or comparing ourselves with them.

An elderly woman and her little grandson, whose face was sprinkled with bright freckles, spent the day at the zoo. Children were waiting in line to get their cheeks painted by a local artist. "You've got so many freckles, there's no place to paint!" a girl in the line said to the little fella. Embarrassed, the little boy dropped his head. His grandmother knelt down next to him. "I love your freckles. When I was a little girl I always wanted freckles," she said, while tracing her finger across the child's cheek. "Freckles are beautiful." The boy looked up, "Really?" "Of course," said the grandmother. "Why just name one thing prettier than freckles." The little boy thought for a moment, peered intensely into his grandma's face and softly whispered, "Wrinkles."

Differences can be scary to a community. The fear is they can fracture it. Often the defensive response is to suppress our differences either by unstated community standards or by individual self-suppression in order to "fit in." But paving over differences deprives the community of its innate richness that each member contributes. A better response is humility.

Humility sees the beauty in freckles and wrinkles. Humility creates an environment that is safe for us to be who we are and know steadfast kindness. Such an environment eschews debating one other and encourages listening respectfully to each other's spiritual journey for the wisdom they have to offer. It is in such an environment that even the heart of the Pharisee can be transformed. If so, perhaps even a Unitarian's can be too. While it is hard for UUs to be humble, we ARE doin' the best that we can.

Discussion/Meditation

What makes you proud to be a Unitarian?
What troubles you?