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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 doing the best that I can.

How many of you remember that country music song sung by Mac Davis from 1975? It's a tongue in cheek song that takes a comedic shot about ego. The core joke is the narrator's claim of a difficult struggle with humility, despite the rest of the song revealing his complete lack of humbleness and self-awareness.

That song is a perfect example of today's gospel story of the Pharisee and the tax collector and about being humble. In this parable Jesus contrasts two characters who are polar opposites especially when it comes to being religious.

The Pharisee was religiously righteous, the tax collector extorted revenue for the Roman oppressors. The Pharisee was smug and confident, the tax man was anxious and insecure. The Pharisee paraded to the temple, the sinner "stood at a distance". The Pharisee stood up, the tax collector looked down. In an act of shocking narcissism, the Pharisee prayed loudly "about himself"; the tax collector could barely pray at all. The Pharisee puffed out his chest in pride; the tax collector beat his breast in sorrow.

Despite all of his pomposity, it's hard to imagine a more earnestly religious person than the Pharisee. He prayed often, fasted regularly, and he gave generously to the poor. His spiritual regimen was not only stringent but he went above and beyond the regular requirements. However, he made two tragic mistakes in his religious life, one about himself, and one about other people.

First, the Pharisee "looked down on everybody else." Let's face it, contempt for others lurks in the human heart which bubbles up easily and frequently no matter who we are. We imagine that in denigrating others we validate ourselves, or that at least we will compare favorably.

The flip side of disdain toward others is justification of oneself. This was the Pharisee's second mistake. The Pharisee thanked God that he was "not like other people" — a thief, an evildoer, or an adulterer. His religious narcissism was a form of spiritual self-validation.

Now before we get too critical of the Pharisee we often do the same thing. Don't we say to ourselves, "Lord, I thank you that I am nothing like the obnoxious caricature of a human being who is the Pharisee in this story. Don't we prefer to identify with the tax collector who appears to be more self aware, mindful, cognizant of his shortcomings and humble. In a way this parable is an indictment of our own self-righteousness, and our pharisaic tendency to extol ourselves by tearing down others. In this case the Pharisee.

Then there's the tax collector who simply says, God, have mercy on me, a sinner. Sinner: Who says that anymore? I don't know many people — religious or secular — who like the word "sinner." Many Christians associate it with shame, self-punishment, and sermons about hellfire and brimstone. Too often, "sinner" is a word that frightens us away from God rather than drawing us closer to God. We also distrust the word because we understand how easily it can be manipulated to justify one's moral or political agenda over another.

Jesus doesn't shy away from the big, bad "S" word. He insists on the practice of acknowledging and naming our core sinfulness. Frankly, what that means is we are all

a beautiful mess — made in God's divine image but mired in human brokenness. To use the word "sinner" is to insist on something more profound and more clarifying than, "I'm not perfect or I make mistakes," or "I've got issues." To use the word sinner is to refuse the arrogant us/them divide employed by the Pharisee, and instead acknowledge that we, too, are utterly lost and bereft, but for the astonishing grace of God.

Note that the tax collector in the parable doesn't name specific sins. He goes much deeper — he names a brokenness that is central to his very being. Growing up, I was taught that sin is "breaking God's laws." Or "missing the mark," like an archer misses his target. Or "committing immoral acts." These definitions aren't wrong, but they only scratch the surface. They assume that sin is just breaking a law or a problem primarily due to doing something wrong. Sin is much more than that.

Sin is a refusal to acknowledge ones own vulnerability and culpability. Sin degrades, dispossess and deprives. It is estrangement, disconnection, sterility, disharmony. It is apathy and care-less-ness. Sin is the opposite of creativity, abundance, coherence, and flourishing. Sin interferes with the opening up of our whole hearts to God, to others, to creation, to ourselves. Sin kills us because sin is a refusal to become fully human.

What Jesus exposes in his parable is the Pharisee's compulsive need to avoid his broken inner life by policing his outer boundaries instead — deciding who is "in" and who is "out," based on his own narrow definitions of purity and piety. It's easy for us 21st century Christians to look down on his arrogance, but honestly, are we much different? Most of secular society sees Christians as thinking we're not like other people – holier than thou – not like that group or that group. Or this political party or that one. Don't we behave sometimes as if we're better than others? Don't we set up religious litmus tests for each other, based on personal feelings and devoutness that have nothing to do with Jesus's open-hearted love and hospitality?

Yes we do and when we do that we can hate with the best of them. The Pharisee shouts what he's not. That he's not a thief a rogue or an adulterer. He catalogs all the people he's not like and ends with the tax collector as his enemy. Consider what happens when we start making lists of what or who we are or we're not. Lists have a tendency to take on an energy all of its own that ends up alienating whole groups of people. We can make lists that can go on and on and refuses to end. When we do that don't we allow scorn — disguised as holy indignation — to take root and grow in our hearts, until love of our neighbor sours and empathy dies?

When we use words to denigrate and dehumanize too often it turns to violence. We cannot do this. God calls us to rise above this pettiness that destroys. Sure it's hard and impossible but we cannot succumb to hating everyone we disagree with that has become the norm in our society. That is sin with a capital S.

This seemingly simple parable should cause us to pause especially if we think that we are not like other people. The ultimate sin of the Pharisee is that he separates himself from humanity one category at a time and the more he separates himself from humanity the more he separates himself from God. He's completely out of relationship – out of whack. It is possible to practice an outwardly beautiful Christianity that is lifeless and pointless in the eyes of Jesus.

Remember, it doesn't matter what form of arrogance our own self righteousness takes because it deadens us towards God and our neighbor. It makes us stingy and small-

minded, cowardly and anxious. It strips away our joy and robs us of peace. It causes us, in Jesus's chilling words, to "honor God with our lips" but to "worship him in vain." Humility on the other hand is the opening up of our empty hearts to receive the abundant mercy of God.

In this parable Jesus is telling us that true humility recognizes our dependence on God thus bringing us into relationship with God. If we could only understand that there is power in humility. Humility gives us the power to foster growth, learning and healthy relationships. It gives us the ability to love as God has taught us to love. In the end God lavishes mercy and love on everyone whether they deserve or not including the Pharisee. The lavish mercy of God cannot be earned. It can only be received. So, open your arms and receive it and humbly share it. Amen.