

“The Tip of the Iceberg”

(Luke 18:9-14; 1 Corinthians 1:26-31)

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Back when I was a college student, I had the chance to read a lot of interesting books. One of the books that stayed with me was written in 1940 by an anthropologist named Evans Pritchard. Evans-Pritchard was studying an African tribe called the Nuer, using a method that was new at that time, but is now taken for granted, called “participant observation.”

The main idea was that you can’t really understand what is going on in a group of people you are observing unless you actually enter into their culture and participate in it, living as they live, and doing what they do. It is a rejection of the idea that you can understand what is happening by watching and taking notes from a distance. It seems like a no-brainer today, but back then actually living among the natives was a fairly bold idea.

The Nuer were a people who’s lives were based on herding cattle. And if you were to watch them from a distance, you might think that they were a simple and unimpressive people; just a group of people living in huts with simple tools, who spent all day with their cattle.

But as Evans-Pritchard participated in the culture, he discovered that their relationship with their cattle was highly detailed. The Nuer had a such a large vocabulary for describing their cattle and all things having to do with cattle, that there was no way to adequately translate the depth of their understanding into English.

Part of EP's point then, was that a people who appear to be very simple when viewed from the outside, turn out to be very sophisticated when viewed as an insider. And his book is a good example of how every culture has a particular genius. But you have to have an insider's understanding of what preoccupies and concerns its people, in order to recognize it.

America from the Outside

The memory of that book has stayed with me over the years, because it connects with my own experience growing up in different places. It reminds me of the importance of not judging what I see without some first-hand inside understanding. It is important, I think, because very often those judgements can be rather harsh and undeserved.

My New Zealand Experience

When I was in high school in New Zealand, I occasionally heard people speaking dismissively about the United States; about how dangerous a country it is or how it is overly commercialized. I remember one of my high school teachers telling our class that educational materials produced in the United States were generally less reliable than materials produced in the UK, and he impressed this on all of us. I'm doubtful that he had any real evidence for saying this and I'm pretty sure that he had never been to the United States. It was rare in those days to meet anyone who had.

I understood that the way many New Zealanders viewed the United States was based on second hand information and colored by some psychological need to see their own country favorably in comparison. They were like anthropologists taking notes from afar and drawing conclusions that said more about who they were than about what Americans were really like.

I don't see any problem with making glowing appraisals of one's own country. New Zealanders have a lot of good reasons to make them. And why shouldn't a people be proud of their culture and its achievements? I think they should. But glowing self-appraisals take on a disturbing

quality, when they are reinforced by making comparisons that cast a negative light on other cultures.

Pride is important, but it becomes dangerous when we bask in our own glow to the extent that the actual value of those in other places is misrepresented and diminished. It seems to me that my high school teacher, as a proud citizen of the British Commonwealth, needed to express his pride in part by arguing that Americans can't be taken seriously.

There is an air of superiority, a contempt and willingness to engage in ridicule, a veiled animosity that I occasionally witnessed in this expression of national pride, that I was willing to let go of and chalk up to ignorance, because I love New Zealand very much. And I am sure that the good people I have mentioned would have more compassion, were they to actually spend some time living here.

The American Experience

It seems to me that we don't have to leave our own country to recognize that the same kind of thing is going on here. We only have to look at the red and blue political maps to see that there is a rural/urban divide and that we are suffering as a society in which too many people

are taking notes on the people in other parts of the country from a distance.

And there is no shortage of discourse on social media, designed to flatter the pride of one group, while misrepresenting, ridiculing and dismissing the other. It seems to me that we human beings are very susceptible to the kind of pride we have been discussing and also to its darker aspects. And there is no shortage of opportunists willing to exploit this weakness in exchange for power.

But the fault doesn't just lie at the feet of these opportunists. It lies with those of us in the population who are willing to let them tell us how it is. But that is a poor substitute for venturing into that other world to see for ourselves before making any sweeping judgements.

Participating in a culture before drawing too many conclusions is important, because unless we have actually experienced what it is like to live the way the other group lives, we don't really understand what they are about. We see only what seems obvious to us and we prefer to see what flatters us. But the truth is that what we see from a distance is only the tip of the iceberg. Underneath that tip is a much larger and more complicated reality.

The Gospel Story

I think that when Jesus draws attention to the Pharisee and the tax collector in this morning's Gospel, he is drawing our attention to something very similar to all that we have been discussing, but on a personal level.

The Pharisee looks at the tax collector and sees only the tip of the iceberg. He sees the little that he has been able to put together in his mind about the person next to him and combining it with what he knows about tax collectors, has drawn a negative conclusion that fits neatly with his own world view and by comparison, supports his highly favorable opinion of himself.

But in reality he knows very little about the man he is treating so dismissively. There is much more to the tax collector than surface appearances might suggest. Under the surface, the tax collector's soul is engaged in a much larger and more profound awareness of the complexities of sin and grace and of his own need. In fact, the tables are turned in this story, and it is the Pharisee who, being so taken with his own religious achievements, turns out to be shallow and incapable of recognizing his own arrogance and need for forgiveness.

I think that this Gospel story helps us to understand, through the relationship between a Pharisee and a tax collector, how some of the larger destructive forces at work in our country originate in our own temptation to make prideful comparisons with others. It highlights a very powerful and potentially destructive human weakness. Because the pridefulness with which one person belittles another, often leads, I believe, to an equally powerful backlash from the one who has been misrepresented and belittled, (although that is not the case with the tax collector in this story).

Practical Application

I think the Gospel Reading has an important practical application for us too, at this time of year. We are entering into the time when the nominating committee will be looking to fill some of the different positions in the church. And part of the discipline of the nominating committee will be to consider all the members of the congregation, not only with an eye to the tip of the iceberg, but with an eye to the substantial depth and talent which you carry with you beyond your surface appearance.

The members of this year's nominating committee will be made know soon. And over the course of November will be on the lookout and perhaps may ask you about whether you would like to serve in a particular way.

When you go down to coffee hour this morning, you will see a poster with pictures of many of the people who have responsibilities for the running of our congregation this year. It is not exhaustive by any means. For example, there is no picture of the choir. And there are many things that happen that are not connected with official positions.

Perhaps the most important is your attendance here in worship. I don't think that there is anything that we can do for each other that is more uplifting and that gives more encouragement to others to stay the course as servants and witnesses to God's love, than your attendance on Sunday morning.

And as we each consider over the coming days what our contributions to our common life will be, where we best fit into the work of the body of Christ in the coming year, it seems good that I finish by pointing to on irony that may not be obvious in the story of the Pharisee and the

tax collector, and that is the extent to which the role of both of these men can also be understood as an argument within ourselves.

I think you have little reason to fear that the nominating committee members are likely to view you harshly or condescendingly as they ponder asking you whether you would be a part of one or other of the ministry teams next year. I think it is more likely that you, if you are like me, you will take the part of the Pharisee and will be willing to pass judgement on yourself and see yourself as little more than the piece of ice that is visible on the surface.

When I am faced with a challenge, I have a tendency to belittle and dismiss myself as someone incapable of being taken seriously. But on reflection, I know that there is much more to my existence than can be seen on the surface. There is the rest of the iceberg that you don't see and it amounts to a lot. It contains many experiences, personal struggles and learnings, even the odd and quirky things about me that I would be embarrassed to let you see. And if I am willing to trust in God then, in the mystery of the way God works, that greater part that lies below the surface will somehow be accessible in a way that more than meets most tasks that I am likely to face. And I believe that same is true for you.

You and I are in many ways like the Widow of Zarapheth, who thought that her bowl of grain was almost empty, but found to her surprise that each day that there was more. God created us with a lot more capability than we imagine and of course when all we see is the tip of an iceberg, it doesn't look like much.

But God has given us lives full with experiences and given each of us a particular genius, that is not meant to be dismissed or disparaged by others and certainly not meant to be dismissed or disparaged by our own selves. And in those moments when we feel that our true gifts are being unleashed, and that we are making a contribution that is good and important, there is enough energy and inspiration to spare.

Let's pause to look toward the depth in others and draw deeply from ourselves and re-energize our congregation to share God's love with passion and creativity, into the days ahead.

