

TOPSY TURVY

Not far from the Greek city of Delphi, lies one of the most important sites in the ancient world. There is a temple to the Greek God Apollo. The high priestess who resided there was known as the Pythia. The Pythia was renowned for prophetic powers. People from far and wide would journey to the temple, paying tribute to the Pythia, asking her to prophesy the future for them. She has come down through the centuries known as the Oracle at Delphi.

Sometime around or shortly after 550 BC the Monarch of a nearby Kingdom came to the Pythia seeking her wisdom. He had it in his mind to attack the Persian Empire, the most powerful state in the known world at the time. The oracle told him, "If you attack the Persians a great empire will fall." Armed with this information, the King departed the Temple and went home to make his preparations for war. He was certain that the great empire of which the oracle had spoken was the Persian Empire.

In 547 BC the king and his army went off to battle the Persians and were soundly defeated. The great empire that was defeated was the very kingdom that monarch who went to the Temple of Apollo ruled. The kingdom was called Lydia. While Lydia wasn't very large, it was one of the richest states in the ancient world. It is believed to be the first state in history to make coins. Not much memory survives of that state in the modern world, but the name of that king survives to this day. For 2,500 years people have sought to become "as rich as Croesus."

Croesus fell victim to one of the most fatal flaws of humanity: greed, arrogance. We can point to people who lack humility because of their wealth or their pedigree or whatever and condemn them as haughty. This kind of bragging is perfectly captured in one of my favorite poems, written by Percy Bysshe Shelley.

I met a traveler from an antique land
Who said: Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desert. Near them, on the sand,
Half sunk, a shattered visage lies, whose frown,
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,
The hand that mocked them and the heart that fed:
And on the pedestal these words appear:
'My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:
Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!'
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away.

I've always been haunted by the image of that poem. The great empire, the statue of the great conqueror, that suffered the fate of all things built by human hands; it crumbled to dust; nothing but ruins remained. That's the fate of all of us.

But there is a particular kind of hauteur that is a problem in our relation to God. It's one to which any member faith can fall prey. It comes from the notion that we are somehow holier than those around us. It comes from people who think that who they are, or what they said or what they've done, or what they believe places themselves in a superior position vis a vis God and the faith than those around them. That they are somehow more blessed- somehow more important in the Kingdom.

That's what happens to this Pharisee. He comes forward and talks about his fasting and his tithing. He points to how good he is. He thanks God that he is not like others, especially this tax collector standing over here. What we need to understand about him is that the people of that day and age would have agreed with him. They likely would have believed that he was better in some way than they were.

Fasting and Tithing were required by the law of Moses. Fairly rigid requirements were laid down. But if the words of the Pharisee are to be believed, he has exceeded those requirements.

Fasting was considered holy. By fasting you deliberately weakened yourself. According to one source I read, what one does when one fasts, then, is stand before one's peers or before God in abject self-humiliation (the Hebrew name for fasting rituals is taanit, "humiliation"). In an honor-shame society, to present a fasting or mourning mien to the outside means one is afflicted indeed. The normal reaction of peers in the face of such abject self-humiliation is to proffer assistance to the person who so humiliated himself (and his family) in public." Short translation, the Hebrews believed one fasted to gain favor from God.

Tithing was, of course, a dedication of one's worldly possessions to God. In a sense, it showed that you were giving over your destiny to God. You showed your trust for God by relying on God enough to give up some of what you had and place your fate in God's hands. You were relying on God completely.

But the Pharisee's actions are deceptive. What appears to be holy, is instead an act of self-aggrandizement. The Pharisee is doing these things to glorify himself - not God. Otherwise, why do it publicly? The one who is really trusting God, the one who is really showing humility in this story, is the tax collector.

Tax collectors, by contrast with the Pharisees, were despised in ancient Palestine. The entire occupation was considered sinful. Part of that was because of the method of tax collection that they used. It was called tax farming. Typically, what would happen was that the Romans would sell the job at auction to the highest bidder. The winner was given a license to collect taxes for a number of years. If you collected more than what you had offered the

Romans, nobody would question it, because you had a license to do it. Tax collectors were despised. Yet, here this guy is, beating his breast, asking God to be merciful because he is a sinner. Yet, Jesus says he is justified rather than the other. I think the thing is

Things are topsy-turvy in the kingdom of God. Those who exalt themselves are humbled. Those who humble themselves are exalted.

Why is this? First of all, the deeds of the greatest among us pale in comparison to God. I've got some news for all of us. God's glory is greater than our own. God is more ethical, stronger, richer, and God does better deeds. In fact, better than all of us put together. In no way are we superior to God. If we're going to start talking about who has done what, that really ought to be where we should start. Shouldn't we start by talking about what God's done, rather than what we've done?

I can't tell you how many times in my life I've heard people talk about the great things they've done for the church, and I sit there and think, it's a pittance compared to what God has done. I'm grateful for everything that everyone does for the church. I am. However, let's put this in context. It's a service to the Kingdom. It's not there so that we can pat ourselves on the back, and to remind ourselves of how good we are and how special we are.

Secondly, I think that when we consider ourselves better than others, the person that we are looking down upon is a child of God, fearfully and wonderfully made by God's hand. When we criticize another person, we are criticizing a work of art- and God is the artist.

I want you to think for a minute about Jesus' life. Jesus wasn't especially rich. He came from an artisan family. His family wasn't that well-connected. His family would have been equivalent to what we would consider a working-class family- Maybe, skilled laborers. He didn't even take up that trade- or, at least, he left it after he started his ministry. Jesus was often homeless. Jesus was often hungry. When he did stay places, he tended to stay in other people's homes. He didn't work on a regular basis, at least, not any occupation that made any money. When I think about the number of times in my life that I've been critical of people like that, I think, "Now, wait a minute! Jesus was often like that ." I'm not saying that people I pass on the street are Jesus; I'm just saying that Jesus humbled himself enough that we maybe we ought to think twice before we judge someone who's in that condition. I'm not saying you should be homeless yourselves; I'm just saying we should not consider ourselves better than others.

Following God isn't easy. It requires us to do something that's very difficult at times. It requires us to find the good in others. Sometimes that's hard to do. It requires us to act humbly. Sometimes that's hard to do. But the rewards are greater than anything we can imagine. That's the other thing that's topsy-turvy in the Kingdom of God. They would won't reward us for our humility, but God will.

