

“Knowing That You Don’t Know”

Rev. Ken McGarry at The First Congregational Church in Stoneham, Massachusetts
October 23, 2022 – Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost

[Joel 2:23-32; Luke 18:9-14](#)

A few years back, a dear friend of mine named Brigitta, who was for many years the senior pastor of the church in Connecticut that I served for 17 years as Director of Youth Ministries, went with her daughters to the Antiques Roadshow when it came to New England. The Antiques Roadshow, in case this is not familiar to you, is a program on PBS that features people having their collectibles appraised by experts. Oftentimes people find themselves pleasantly surprised, or shocked even, by the expert’s assessment of the great value of whatever family heirloom, collection, or knickknack they’ve brought to the event. And also, quite often, people find themselves unpleasantly surprised or shocked by their cherished item’s lack of monetary value. My friend Brigitta was surprised in this latter, unpleasant fashion when she had her own items assessed.

Her treasured possessions that she brought with her that day was a collection of items given to her by her father, who served as an American diplomat in Rwanda in Africa, where Brigitta was born and spent her first few years of life. Upon showing an expert at the Antique Roadshow, a specialist in African antiquities, one of the items from the collection, a beautifully carved wooden walking stick, the expert exclaimed, “I am unimpressed,” assigning the item very little monetary value. Upon presenting to the expert a second, more prized item, a wooden tribal mask, the expert responded again, “I am unimpressed.” Still hoping for a positive assessment, Brigitta and her daughters presented the expert their third, most prized item, an antique tribal spear that Brigitta’s father received as a gift from a Zulu chief. The expert carefully examined this third, most-prized treasure, measuring it, weighing it, looking at it very closely with a magnifying glass. Brigitta’s hopes were high that this Zulu chief’s spear, at least, would be recognized as being of great value. The expert, after putting down his magnifying glass and measuring tools, looked at Brigitta and offered his final assessment: “Dear madam,” he said, “*I remain unimpressed!*”

In today’s gospel lesson from Luke, we heard a parable about how a Pharisee offered to God in prayer a recital of a list of his own collection of religious deeds

and accomplishments of piety, perhaps so that God, like an expert assessor on the Antique Roadshow, would look it, be greatly impressed, and assign these deeds and their doer an impressively high value. And the Pharisee's deeds were impressive. He was a member of an esteemed group of people that led religious activities in local synagogues and people's homes, and he acted the part, being faithful in following the Law of Moses in not stealing or committing adultery or doing what was otherwise forbidden. Going above and beyond what was required of him, he fasted twice per week and gave away a tenth of all his earnings. His religious resume sure looked impressive, but not to God, who was unimpressed by the blessed braggadocio's benign behavior.

God was impressed, however, by the behavior of another person, a tax collector, who presented a much less holy collection of deeds. Tax collectors in Jesus' day were not like ancient IRS agents, servants of the state, trying to ensure that everyone contributed fairly to the commonwealth as they enforced the law, but were reviled as thieves, collecting, in collusion with the ruling, oppressive Roman empire, whatever they could, taking especially from the poor and powerless in ways that enriched themselves and other wealthy elites. Ever in pursuit of their own enrichment, they were notorious for their ruthlessness and dishonesty, were deeply despised by the people, and were considered to be about as far away from being holy as you could get. However, it was the unholy tax collector of today's parable that was the one, not the pious Pharisee, who offered to God something truly valuable and impressive: Humility. In offering this simple prayer, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner," the tax collector recognized his low estate as a sinful person and his need for God's mercy upon him. In humbly recognizing his need for God and God's mercy, the tax collector impressed God, and in spite of his past deeds, was recognized as righteous by God.

We are all able to be like the reviled tax collector, finding God's blessing upon us by humbly seeking God's mercy, but too often we are more like the righteous Pharisee, trusting in ourselves and our many good works to save us. While our deeds should be good -- we should always do our best to follow to good-deed-doing way of Jesus -- we need to recognize that our good deeds and religious rituals, no matter how good or devout we are, do not impress God and will not earn God's favor. Even the best among us are in need of God and should seek

mercy from God. The good news is that God is ever-loving, ever-forgiving, and ever-longing to lovingly forgive us when we turn to God. Thanks be to God!

Today, on this Golden Age Sunday, we are recognizing and celebrating our members and friends who have lived and experienced God's mercy and grace for over 80 years. Our golden agers can teach us many things, but one quality in particular that we recognize our elders possess is their wisdom, gained from many years of experiencing the highs and lows of life and from learning many of life's lessons. Many of the golden agers I know and have known have impressed me by their wisdom, and in particular, their wise ways of humbly knowing that they haven't, over their long lives full of years, somehow figured it all out, mastered the art of life, or risen above their need for God or a loving community. Many of the elders I know possess a humble approach to life, know that that they don't know everything, are aware of life's fragility and their need for God, and are grateful for loving communities. Some of us, of course, allow the difficulties of life to make us bitter and cold; but more of us have allowed the experiences of our years, especially the ones that are hard or painful, to humble us, to become tenderizers of our hearts, softening us as people and making us more aware of the hurts and needs of others. These are wise ways that all of us, old and young alike, should embrace this morning.

So let us all embrace and hold the wisdom of humility. Let's not try to do what is right and good so as to impress God, who *will* remain unimpressed, but as a grateful response to a merciful and gracious God's never-ending lovingkindness. Let us humbly lift up one another, especially, on this Golden Age Sunday, our elders, recognizing the amazing gifts and rich resources they bring to our community of faith in their stories and examples of humility and faithfulness. And let us carry on the tradition of our elder brother in faith Jesus, who taught us to make the greatest impression on the world by humble, self-giving love. May we strive to do so today and every day. Amen.