

**The Rent is Too Damn High**  
**The Rev. Rob Gieselmann**

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Two men went up to the Temple to pray. The reason the two went up is because that is how you get to Temple. You go up.

There are two factors to this, going up. First, Jerusalem is the highest point along a chain of Israeli mountains, 2600 feet above sea level, and 3900 feet above the Dead Sea. You go up to Jerusalem like you walk from downtown Mill Valley to the top of Mt. Tam.

Second, the Temple itself was built at the city's highest point. You had to walk up steps just to get to the Temple, itself.

A number of the psalms are called, psalms of ascent, because they were written for pilgrims. Pilgrims would chant the psalms repetitively on their way up to Jerusalem, and on their way up to the Temple.

I don't know about you, but I can just picture these two men, the Pharisee and the tax collector, ascending the Temple Mount –

The Pharisee with his head held high, looking around to see who is watching him. He is, after all, an upright citizen, and good Christian and an even better American. He's wearing his Sunday best, or in the Jewish world, he wore his phylacteries long, those curls at his brow containing the holiest Scripture.

The tax collector is not an upright citizen. He is just awful, and he knows if certain people are watching him, they'll stone him. He's cheated widows out of pennies and poor farmers out of their last drachma. He has no business climbing these steps.

But once inside, the tax collector explodes. He beats his chest, and cries out to God, to anybody, for just a thumbnail of mercy.

The Pharisee recognizes the tax collector, and disdains him. Our version of Scripture doesn't say that – but the word is there. The Pharisee disdains everybody, especially this poor sap.

I would have disdained the man, too. A tax collector was like a mafia boss, or in our world, he as a union boss to a Republican, or a corporate raider to a Democrat. The Tax collector was the dirty one, the sinner.

One of my favorite movies is The American President. Michael Douglas plays widowed President, Andrew Shepherd, and Annette Bening, plays the lobbyist he falls in love with.

As their relationship unfolds, President Shepherd's political opponents attack him viciously for it. The President doesn't respond to the political attacks, so tension grows. So much so, that finally, an exasperated Annette Bening asks Michael Douglas,

How do you have patience for people who say they love America, but clearly can't stand Americans?

Can't stand Americans. As in disdain them – Like the Pharisee, and suddenly, Annette Bening opens up this entire story for us.

She nails it, for that is exactly what is going on in our political system these days: each side disdains the other.

Have you seen any campaign ads? They are a collection of cheap shots.

Meg Whitman calls Jerry Brown a liar. Jerry Brown accuses Meg Whitman of “insider” deals, hinting at crimes.

Barbara Boxer compares Carly Fiorina to Sara Palin, and in one ad that cleverly pans back and forth between Fiorina and Palin, there is a subliminal scene in which Hitler appears on a huge banner.

Fiorina accuses Boxer of being arrogant, and not working for Californians. I don't care if Boxer is arrogant, I want Fiorina to tell me why I should vote for her –

or any of them – if they can't stop acting like children.

Whatever happened to statesmanship? When one side would show genuine respect for the other, despite their differences? Why this need to attack personally?

Thank you God that I'm not like that poor sap over there. Vote for me.

Meanwhile, I'm looking for the tax collector among the group – one politician who stand-ups and says,

I don't know it all, I don't get it all, I don't have all the answers. But I have changed. I will listen, and engage, and represent you as best I can.

The politician who debates issues with quality and depth, not from the position of, “I'm right and you're wrong,” not a purveyor of answers, but a seeker of solutions.

Where is the statesman who seeks truth, who recognizes the truth not just in himself, but in his opponent?

After all, isn't truth located somewhere between and among people, not monopolized by one person? Truth is a shared treasure, not an owned possession, as in, we hold these truths ... to be self-evident.

Each Democrat needs a Republican, and each conservative needs a liberal. In the Christian world, we'd say, each Episcopalian needs a Catholic, and each Baptist needs a Methodist.

We need each other, and that is why debate is so important, because the truth about truth is that it will refuse revelation in any one location.

But all I'm hearing in this awful election cycle is this: Thank you, God, that I'm not like that poor sap over there.

Personally, I like the guy running for Governor of New York: he is running on one line only:

The Rent is Too Damn High.

There's nothing disingenuous about that.

Now, You may think this sermon is about politics.

It isn't. Actually.

The writer and priest Robert Capon says that this story about the Pharisee and tax collector is not about who was right and who was wrong. The key is not that the Pharisee was deemed unjust by his arrogance, and the tax collector was justified by his humility.

In fact, the Pharisee lived a good and upright life; he upheld the law and promoted a better society. He probably recycled and attended the Marin Lecture Series. He has led the responsible life we teach our kids to lead.

Not like the tax collector. The man lived an abysmal life, he was mean and he destroyed others.

In fact, the religious truth is that both, says Capon, were dead – dead men walking, if you will.

Both men needed resurrection.

Each of us needs help from outside ourselves. None of us is self-contained.

First, we need God – and in our Christian world, that means we confess that we need the miraculous and marvelous saving help of God in Christ. We need the Good-

Friday - Easter event, where death collapses under the weight of life – Life explodes from the tomb, and saves all manner of human, good and bad, Pharisee and tax collector.

You and I are reconciled to God, where once we were lost, now we are found.

Second, we need each other. One another, quite unlike the Pharisee, who stood off at a distance from the tax collector, we can at last acknowledge our deep need for others – the person at my right, and the person at my left, literally and politically!

Truth does not reside in me because of me. I require you to complete me. But the Pharisee could not imagine that he needed the one he disdained.

That is why it was the tax collector who walked out of the Temple with held his head high. He pulled clean air from the crisp blue day into his lungs, for despite his awful life, he found peace. For the first time in his awful life, he saw clearly his own fallibility and desperate need.

When the Pharisee walked outside, the bright sun blinded him. He covered his eyes, and though he was still so very proud of himself, he felt oddly dirty.