**Illusion and Hope**

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Kalamazoo Mennonite Fellowship

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Luke 18:9-14

I need to start this morning by admitting that I’ve been more than a bit sad for a while, and, frankly, I think I still am this morning. It has to do with, I sure, some personal things that are going on in my life. Perhaps, too, this has to do with the national elections, which are affecting me more than I would like to admit, even as I see that others are wearied from this long and mucky slog to the election.

For example, I wrote a very depressed status message on Facebook earlier this month. I wrote, “Kinda feel like I’m watching American dissolve before my eyes.”

To the credit of the people who are my Facebook friends, there were a lot of good comments. One friend, Aaron Barnhart, said things were even worse in during the US elections of 1828 and 1876. One friend, Clarissa Fetrow, posted a song that was just what I needed to listen to.. And another friend, Gail Griffin, a former colleague of mine at Kalamazoo College wrote this, “The lid is coming off. We can learn from this.” A couple of other people said similar things.

Here’s a very specific example. Last Sunday, I drove Bishop Amos Muhagachi back to his home in Elkhart, and he told me a very sad story that happened to his son, Victor. Victor is a freshman at Georgia State University, and he is there on a scholarship. He is a black Tanzanian, and, as he was sitting in his room, a group of white students started pounding on his door. According to Bishop Amos, they had heard that Victor was receiving a full scholarship, and they were angry that they were not getting the same level of scholarships as a black foreigner. They threatened Victor, and did some damage to his room. His phone was destroyed.

To think that this story is from 2016 and not 1966 is, frankly, astonishing to me.

Let me move to the gospel story, and then return.

The gospel story is a familiar one. One is a Pharisee, and the other is a tax collector. Why does Jesus use a Pharisee? Is it because he thinks they are especially hypocritical? I don’t think so. I think he is signaling that this man is a *good* man, who tries to do the right thing. He wants to be different from the majority of humanity; he strives to follow God. He tithes and fasts. He is certainly more generous than most of the people I know.

But even good people can hold other people in contempt. And people like the tax collector were easy to hold in contempt. They collaborated with the invading force of Rome by agreeing to pay the taxes Rome imposed, not by taking a cut of those taxes, but by charging people extra money on top of the taxes, which is how they made a living. If you are a rock-ribbed Republican who wants to see government shrink, he’s like a politician who makes her living on by increasing the control of government over taxpayers’ lives. If you’re a yellow-dog Democrat who wants to see people get a fair shake, he’s like a plutocratic financier who gets bailed out by the government while receiving obscene bonuses from his company.

Jesus, as he does so often, turns things on their heads. For it’s the tax collector who goes home “justified” before God. Why is that? Of the tax-collector, Jesus says, that he stood far off away from everyone, not even looking up to heaven (the way one would normally pray), but beat his breast and said, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!'

I said I would return from the gospel story. I think there are some interesting connections we can draw. For me, it comes from that comment that my colleague, Gail Griffin, made, that the lid is coming off. I had written that I felt like I was seeing America dissolve. And Gail was basically saying, you have been living an illusion, but the reality is being revealed. This disillusionment is painful, but important.

Similarly, the “good” person in Jesus’s story is living an illusion. He thought that he could hold people in contempt; no, even stronger than that, he thought he should hold some people in contempt, people like this collaborator, or people who steal or act out sexually or are bad. But God, says Jesus, does not require or even approve of such contempt.

The Pharisee was living an illusion.

The tax-collector was disillusioned. He knew his own heart, perhaps he even believed that the way he made his living was sinful. But any illusions he held about himself getting a pat on the back from God, or of needing anything but mercy dissolved as he beat his own breast in anguish.

I believe that there was a medieval spiritual practice called *desengaño,* the Spanish word for disillusionment. Honestly, I haven’t been able to find out very much about it. But I think I like the idea of a spiritual practice of attempting to dissolve the illusions we live with every day. The Anabaptist ideal of *humility* will be helped by disillusion, I think.

I did find one Protestant talking about the positive value of disillusionment. Oswald Chambers, writes in his famous book *My Utmost For His Highest*:

Disillusionment means that there are no more false judgments in life. To be undeceived by disillusionment may leave us cynical and unkindly severe in our judgment of others, but the disillusionment which comes from God brings us to the place where we see men and women as they really are, and yet there is no cynicism, we have no stinging, bitter things to say. Many of the cruel things in life spring from the fact that we suffer from illusions. We are not true to one another as facts; we are true only to our ideas of one another. Everything is either delightful and fine, or mean and dastardly, according to our idea.

The refusal to be disillusioned is the cause of much of the suffering in human life. It works in this way—if we love a human being and do not love God, we demand of him every perfection and every rectitude, and when we do not get it we become cruel and vindictive; we are demanding of a human being what he or she cannot give. There is only one Being Who can satisfy the last aching abyss of the human heart, and that is the Lord Jesus Christ. Why Our Lord is apparently so severe regarding every human relationship is because He knows that every relationship not based on loyalty to Himself will end in disaster. Our Lord trusted no man, yet He was never suspicious, never bitter. Our Lord’s confidence in God and in what His grace could do for any man was so perfect that He despaired of no one. If our trust is placed in human beings, we shall end in despairing of everyone[[1]](#footnote-1).

Our gospel story says the tax collector, disillusioned of his own goodness, went away justified with God, while the good person remained in the illusion that he was good despite trusting in himself and holding others in contempt.

Jesus, of course, would not want the tax collector to remain in his disillusionment. After all, the tax collector called out for mercy, and Jesus indicates it was mercy that he received.

I would like to suggest a kind of “spiritual ladder” that we climb.

At the foot of the ladder are illusions. The illusion that our own goodness is enough, or that our correct political attitudes are enough, or our racial groups, or families, or are enough to keep us safe and make us whole.

The first step of the ladder is disillusionment. The lid is pulled off, and we see what is inside ourselves and others and systems and powers. We cry, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner.”

The second step is faith. We believe that God has mercy on us, and we accept that mercy. There might even be time for a little rejoicing in that mercy! The Pharisee’s illusion was that he was acceptable because he was good enough. The tax collector’s faith was that he was accepted although he was not good enough.

But we don’t want to stop there. We want to keep climbing.

The third step is faithfulness. We choose to live faithful lives, learning to be good. Like the Pharisee, we choose to engage in behavior that supports our faith. Like the Pharisee, we choose to be generous. Unlike the Pharisee, we never look down in contempt at others, or think that we are ever but just starting on our ascent.

The fourth step is hope, the “evidence of things not seen.” When we hope, we accept, as true, a future we do not yet see. We have pierced through the illusions of our own adequacy, but we also pierce through the illusion that we will always be inadequate. Rather, we know we will not be disappointed with the outcome; we will become the people God means us to be. It will take time, and never be complete in this lifetime, but it *will* start in this lifetime, and we will see results year by year.

Of course, the steps on this ladder are not just a one-time thing. We are likely to be fooled again and again, disillusioned again and again, need to have faith again and again, remain faithful always, and hope always. And different parts of of our lives will go through this cycle at different paces.

But hear the good news if you are feeling disillusioned. The tax collector invites you to cry out with him, “God be merciful to me, a sinner!” This is a step on the ladder, and it’s just where you need to be, but you can receive mercy to ascend higher.

Our journey is:

- Illusion

- Disillusion

- Faith

- Faithfulness

- Hope

Benediction:

Romans 5: 1. Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. 2 Through him we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in our hope of sharing the glory of God. 3 More than that, we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, 4 and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, 5 and hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit which has been given to us.

1. Chambers, Oswald. (1986). My Utmost For His Highest: Selections For the Year. Grand Rapids, MI: Oswald Chambers Publications; Marshall Pickering. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)