

In Whom We Trust – Luke 18:9-14

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This is an off-year when it comes to elections around the country. Aren't you glad?

There are still some taking place, however. Knoxville City Council seats will be decided. The national focus is on state races in Virginia, New Jersey, and the mayoral race in New York City.

I read about highlights from that New York mayor's debate this past week, though, and it left me grateful that, at least around here, we aren't subject this year to the mud-slinging that has really always been part of campaigning but has been heightened to unbearable degrees in recent decades.

If we just witnessed the debates and saw the advertising during every election cycle, we'd be left to think, "There must not be any worthy people running for public office, because all we hear about them from their opponents are negatives."

Candidates have learned that saying negative things about their opponents will garner them more votes. But it's a shame that these people have to rely on saying something bad about the other to get ahead and be successful.

Imagine if you would that the two individuals we find in the parable we just read are running against each other for public office. It's the Pharisee against the tax collector. Except, in this political race, the candidates are not vying for the public's support, but someone else's.

They both go to the temple to pray. The Pharisee, like all political candidates are entitled to do, quickly lifts up his accomplishments so that the voter—God in this case, we conclude—will grant his approval.

“I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all my income,” he says. But before he says all this, he begins with an attack that we might find in a modern political campaign. He resorts to his own negative advertising. “I thank God that I am not like the other people,” he exclaims. And one can imagine him looking over and pointing at the tax collector as he rattles off those he’s thankful to not be like—“thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector.”

The tax collector then has his turn to make his case, the reasons why God should approve of him as worthy to be commended. He has the stage and fully has the opportunity to lift up his strengths and good deeds to the Lord and to refute the charges made by the Pharisee. But, instead, all the man can do is bow his head, beat his breast, and say, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner.”

It is remarkable that the tax collector does not trumpet his own attributes and accomplishments like any candidate trolling for votes would. Yet, it is especially remarkable to those of us living in this day and age, that when given an opportunity to tear down the person standing next to him, to tell of the shortcomings the Pharisee has, he says nothing. In contemporary language, he doesn’t engage in the politics of personal attacks.

This was the man who went home exalted by God, while the Pharisee (the one with all the self-described good deeds) goes home humbled by God.

Being humble is different than being humbled, of course. Being humble doesn't mean biting our tongues when it is time to speak up or feel good about what we have accomplished. We have the right to believe in ourselves and in the good things we do. But we violate the call to humility when, in speaking of our righteousness, we look down and judge the sins or successes of others.

Maybe instead of channeling our energy toward others through boasting or judgment, we would find ourselves more humble by showing others mercy and respect instead.

John Ruskin once said, "I believe that the first test of a truly great man is his humility. I do not mean by humility, doubt of his own power. But really great people have a curious feeling that greatness is not in them, but through them. And they see something divine in others and are endlessly, foolishly, incredibly merciful."

It is hard to show humility by being merciful to others if there is not a belief that the person next door, the business competitor, the high school teammate, or the political rival holds the same place in the eyes of God that we ourselves do. Despite another's views that we consider wacky, the sins of another that we find indefensible, or the accomplishments of a competitor that we don't believe measure up to ours, it is wise to remember that we, just like them, are to humble ourselves in the sight of the Lord by confessing, as did the tax collector, that we indeed are sinners.

You may remember enough about my preaching over these last dozen years to know that from time to time I like to quote David Brooks, an author and columnist for the New

York Times. He writes about politics but also the culture and faith and our common need to treat each other better.

This week, he had a column titled, “The Rot Creeping into our Minds.” And it had to do with the degradation of our democracy and how it’s being played out in numerous ways on both sides of the political aisle, including this current government shutdown.

And among other things, he said that the core of our rot is politicians’ tendency to use the word “fight” in their campaign rhetoric...they’re promise to “fight” for the middle class, their desire to prove their toughness.

“This is no longer just a metaphor,” Brooks wrote. “It’s a mind-set. We now have a lot of people in this country who do not believe that democracy is about trying to persuade people, it’s about fighting, crushing and destroying people.

“Democracy is about persuasion. Our Constitution is a vast machine that is supposed to increase the amount of deliberation, conversation and persuasion in society. Our elections are supposed to be raw, rollicking persuasion contests.

“The people who want their leaders to “fight” harder just want them to shout their side’s orthodoxies at higher and higher volume. They just want their leaders to ramp up the bellicosity of their rhetoric so that the extremists on their side feel good.”

“What defines extremists these days? It’s not that they hold ideological extreme positions. It is that they treat politics as if it were war. They use the language, mental habits and practices of warfare. They are letting their inner Mussolini out for a romp.”

Democracy is about persuading others and about opening ourselves to being persuaded. It's stating our case in front of an adversary, but acknowledging that the other might be right. It's not about exalting ourselves all the time, but humbling ourselves.

Only then can leaders work together and find solutions to the most vexing problems. It's about trusting in the possibilities of others' viewpoints and talents, as much as we trust in our own.

And all of us, beyond just our political leaders, can adopt the mantra of the tax collector in this parable: "God, be merciful to me, a sinner."

A missionary named Hudson Taylor was scheduled to speak at a large church in Melbourne, Australia. The moderator of the service introduced him in eloquent and glowing terms. He told the large congregation all that Taylor had accomplished in China and then presented him as "our illustrious guest." Taylor stood quietly for a moment, and then opened his message by saying, "Dear friends, I am the little servant of an illustrious Master."

Aren't we all!

Did you hear about the pastor who was voted the most humble pastor in America? His congregation gave him a medal that said, "To the most humble pastor in America." But, they took the medal away from him the next Sunday because he wore it during worship.

We should not wear around our necks for all to see our judgments of others. Instead, let's trust in God's mercy rather than trusting in our own righteousness—so that we will be humbly exalted.