

Sermon for Sunday, October 23, 2022

Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost

“Healing from Contempt”

Reverend Amy Zalk Larson

Good Shepherd Lutheran Church

Decorah, Iowa

[Click here to read scripture passages for the day.](#)

Beloved People of God, grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus.

Some parts of scripture seem remote from our lives. Lepers, pigs possessed by demons, and even shepherds aren't part of our normal daily routine. But this story today hits awfully close to home. Jesus told them a parable about the dangers of self-righteousness and regarding others with contempt. Ouch. Thanksgiving dinner survival guides are now a thing, sold in stores and online. We know a bit about contempt.

The Pharisee prays, “Thank God I'm not like those people.” How often do our thoughts or conversations sound like that? Thank God I'm not an extremist like her, a selfish billionaire like him, as dangerous to our economy, to American democracy, as they are. Get a load of that! Can you BELIEVE this guy?!? Want to know what's wrong with the world? It's those people. Thank GOD I'm not like them.

That kind of stuff poisons families, congregations, and democracies. Renowned researchers of healthy relationships, Drs. Julie and John Gottman, and their Gottman Institute, have identified contempt as a key sign that a relationship is in serious trouble.¹ But what can we do about it? What hope is there for change?

Jesus points us to a tax collector who pleads with God for mercy. This man knows his need and asks for help in a humble way. Interestingly, the Gottman Institute has identified that as an important way to address the contempt that arises within us. Expressing our needs and our longings can bring healing. I know that sounds strange when public life is contemptuous, but stay with me. This idea is most clearly articulated by Gottman Therapist Ken Fremont-Smith. I'll share a link to his guidance with the sermon online. I'm also available as a support for you and your relationships. (“How to Change Your Own Contempt”, by Ken Fremont-Smith on the Gottman Institute Blog.)²

First, Fremont-Smith says we need to understand why we act with contempt. He says, “Contempt is not a sign of sadism or wickedness on the part of the person throwing [it]. Rather, what drives contempt is desperation. You express contempt ... because you believe you are being disrespected and that you need to defend yourself.” Many of us these days feel disrespected and threatened by the world, by others. So, we respond with contempt. I think that may also be what's happening for the Pharisee in our parable today.

¹ <https://www.gottman.com/about/research/faq/>

² <https://www.gottman.com/blog/how-to-change-your-own-contempt/>

The Pharisees and all the Jewish people were mightily threatened by the Roman occupiers and the tax collectors who worked for them. Rome ruled them with an iron fist. Romans lived in a way that make the Kardashians look morally upright. Tax collectors were active collaborators with an occupying force. They volunteered to work for the Romans because they could make a lot of money doing so. And they would collect more than what was owed to Rome and keep the difference. So, it's understandable that this Pharisee felt contempt about the tax collector and the Roman adulterers, thieves, and rogues that threatened his community. And yet, contempt didn't help him to live in right relationship with God and others. It didn't make things better.

And contempt doesn't help us. We want to be standing up for ourselves and for those who are vulnerable, but we end up just standing against others. We sound a lot like those we think are the problem. We act in ways that don't align with how we want to behave, with how God wants us to live. So, what do we do with this fear and anger to avoid being contemptuous?

The Gottman Institute has a ton of research showing that expressing our feelings and longings provides a way out. He says, "People doing contempt think that they are expressing emotions—but they aren't. They are certainly feeling emotions, but contempt is expressing judgments, which others resent. So, the key antidote to contempt is expressing your feelings and longings—and expressing them well. Fremont-Smith gives examples of what this looks like in close relationships.

Rather than saying, "What on earth is wrong with you, driving like a maniac! Why can't you be responsible—like me?!" You could say, "When you drive like that, I get scared! I worry we'll have an accident, even though I know you're an alert driver. Can we talk about what's going on?"

Rather than, "Really? You 'forgot' to let me know you had a conflict with that event? As if. I never do this to you ..." You could say, "Hey, I can forget things myself – sometimes even important things! But this hurt! I felt embarrassed being there by myself. I really want an apology!"

Instead of lashing out at another, you are expressing how you feel, how you hope for things to be different. Of course, it's hard to do that with more than a few close family members and friends. But identifying our longings and expressing them well seems important for life in the public sphere. If we share what we hope for, what we long for in our life together, that is much more effective than focusing on what others are doing wrong. We can stand up for what's important without having to stand against others.

We can also bring our feelings and longings to God in prayer as the tax collector in today's parable does. Like him, we really need help. We feel threatened and afraid, and we aren't helping matters. We need to come to God to say, have mercy on us, heal us. Bring our lives into alignment with your ways, your wisdom. Turn us from anger and contempt, turn us to you and to your ways of life. Beloved, we can do this because God hears our prayers for help, because Jesus draws us into true righteousness - right relationship with God and others.

Our life, our hope, our well-being comes from God, not from being right or convincing others of our point of view. Healing in our communities and country isn't dependent upon people agreeing with us. Rather, God is working to bring about the kingdom in which all experience harmony and well-being. We participate in that by longing for it, praying for it, and standing for it. We can let go of self-righteousness and contempt and join God in imagining and working for a different world.

You are held in God. You are beloved. You can live with love and hope.

Amen.