

TEXT: Luke 18:9-14
THEME: Religion is a response to the mystery of existence
SUBJECT: Religion
TITLE: Vantage Point

Twentieth Sunday After Pentecost
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Messiah Moravian
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Facing death is a particularly clarifying vantage point for seeing what matters most. Paul, writing to Timothy, declares “the time of my departure has come.” A better translation is “the season of my dissolution is near.” The longer you live the more you can appreciate “dissolution” as a fitting description for the winter season of one’s life.

An octogenarian bishop observes that one of the saddest moments is when we realize we are no longer at home in the world and are baffled at how it operates. When we were young and the future was filled with promise, it was thrilling to celebrate the constant shift and change of history. But when we have joined the ranks of not only the old but the old fashioned, the change we used to embrace so eagerly now makes us feel like a stranger in our own land.

From the season of our dissolution it is easy to see how ridiculously serious we were about too many things. In the heat of the race to make a living, to establish our place in the social order, we competed for everything with everyone, constantly comparing ourselves with others.

These comparisons begin early. At the preschool fall festival last Sunday, two siblings came to the pumpkin decorating table, a boy less than two and a girl about four. Parents and grandparents were praising little boy’s efforts at decorating his pumpkin. Finally, big sister had all she could take and blurted out “But mine is better, isn’t it?”

It is wise to choose our comparisons carefully. We can always find someone to compare ourselves with on some point that will make us feel good about ourselves. We can also find someone to compare ourselves with that will make us wonder why we get out of bed.

The Pharisee, praying to himself in the Temple, chose his comparison wisely. The Pharisee did everything he was supposed to do and did it to the letter of the law. He was the kind of person you want managing your money. The tax collector, on the other hand, would rob you blind given half a chance.

Jesus, however, doesn’t see these men from the perspective of socially responsible citizenship. He has a different vantage point. He knows the tax collector had higher aspirations for life but a series of factors, many beyond his control, led him to a less honorable life. His saving grace is knowing who he is, not pretending to be more than he is, not thinking himself greater than anyone else.

The tragedy is to die not knowing who we are, and to keep the act going until the end. The toughest lesson life teaches us is the difference between who we wanted to be and who we

actually are. We may believe we chose the high road and did so for the right reason, but from the vantage point of the end we may realize how large a role self-interest played in our choices. We may even discover the road we thought we chose chose us.

A life takes as long as it takes to bring us to our truth. When life has done its work, we can take a deep breath and admit we didn't know what we were doing. We made it up as we went along. A sense of humor helps us see our pretensions, foibles, and conceits. To be disillusioned of our prideful pretensions is the beginning of a humble self-acceptance.

Confusing morality for religion makes humble self-acceptance harder to come by. Morality thrives on comparisons: right and wrong, good and evil, the righteous and the sinner. The religion of the Pharisee and his descendants through history into the present moment, betrays life, mocks God, and diminishes the human spirit.

Another way to see religion is as a response to the puzzle of our existence. We are the only animal not only to wonder about our own existence but to wonder about the existence of existence itself. Why is there something rather than nothing?

Is there a reality behind existence that created it, and can we relate to it in any way? The problem is we have a limited vantage point from which to see and seek the answer to this question. One theologian coined a word to describe our predicament: "ungetbehindability."

In our search for meaning in a universe that does not explain itself, we can't prove there is anything or nothing behind the universe. This is, or should be, a humbling recognition.

It is also too frightening for many who long for certainty. Who doesn't know certainty's allure? But there is no faith absent doubt. Doubt is part of the deal. That is why faith is often characterized as a struggle. From the end of the road Paul writes, "I have struggled the good struggle, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith."

We do religion's work most faithfully when we ask "Why is this doctrine, this truth claim, vital to the life of the soul and that one fatal? Why does this practice enhance the health and wellbeing of the individual, the community, life itself, while that practice diminishes, demeans and even destroys human dignity and the flourishing of life?"

The pride-filled prayer of the Pharisee turns religion into a commodity, an ego enhancing product to sell. The humble prayer of the tax collector makes religion an honest look into the soul, a confession of the soul's questions and difficulties, its perplexities and ambiguities.