

I am very much getting a charge out of some commercials I hear on satellite radio for a product called “Zyppah,” an anti-snoring device. In the commercials, an actor uses what I suppose is meant to be a Brooklyn or maybe New Jersey accent to tell us listeners that we may not be getting enough sleep because, *ta da*, we are snoring!. Those commercials are quite humorous, while more straight forward is another commercial for a brand of sheets that says we might not be getting enough sleep because of our sheets; it’s not a very convincing sales pitch, but the sheets are actually an excellent bargain for their quality.

But what is enough sleep? Doctors will tell you that the right amount of sleep varies from person to person. I am not sure what is the right amount for me; if I get eight hours for a few nights, I do not need that much the next few nights, but if I get much less than seven hours for four days or so, I am bushed. I do not know how much I need.

But my wonderful wife, Patricia, does need well over eight; I think it’s largely inherited. And Patricia *likes* to sleep, and we joke that she is very good at it. While her job and her own health condition have recently increased the amount of sleep she needs, so that we are not joking about it so much, I still sometimes tell her that if sleeping ever became a competitive sport, she could turn professional, and even be on the Olympic team for *competitive sleeping*.

Competitive sleeping is, of course, a harmless joke between Patricia and me, but I fear that *competitive self-righteousness* is a problem to which many of us, especially and ironically those of us professing to be Christians, are guilty, and it is, indeed, something Jesus addresses in our reading from Luke, but not for the only time is this a topic in Luke, and if I am stealing from myself the opportunity to use this passage later in the year when it crops up in the Lectionary, so be it, but this other, fairly well known, passage goes thus — and please understand that Jesus’ listeners would all consider that tax collectors in those times were dishonest and possibly thieves:

Luke 18:9 He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: 10 “Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. 11 The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. 12 I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.’ 13 But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’ 14 I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.”

Seems strange, does it not, that in the passage I read as our Gospel lesson, we encounter somewhat the same — not identical, but related — issue: the assumption that some need not consider ourselves sinners, and that no matter, we are not so pathetic as *he is* or *she is*.

And Jesus clearly does not favor our participating in the *competitive self-righteousness* game, and juxtaposes it with a competitive . . . well, let's wait.

Of course, for a sermon title — and my sermon titles normally appear on the outside sign at Florence, — “*Competitive Sinning*” seemed like it might be intriguing to passers-by, were there any, but it also seemed interesting to me because of two concepts to which I turn.

First, for some reason, *competitive sinning* suggested to me that I look up the quotation attributed to Martin Luther, “Be a sinner and sin boldly.” What in heavens name kind of idea is that?

Well, as we find so often when people cite short quotations from the Bible itself, the quotation is misleading and out-of-context, and I'll return to why it is, but the second idea — not my own — was one to which I referred here in Coolidge about two weeks ago; I am not sure I used it in Florence. Ann Graham-Johnson, essentially one-half of my predecessor at this church, was here, and helped lead the worship service, then sent me an e-mail requesting I send her the quote to which I had referred, which in fact is in a prayer by the same person as is today's Prayer of Confession, the Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard, known both derisively and affectionately as “the dismal Dane.” During my tenure in Florence, we have used this prayer any number of times:

God of Love, you have commanded us to forgive our enemies, our brother or sister in error, not seven times, but seventy times seven. When then will you, so much more forgiving than us, tire of pardoning us who are truly repentant sinners?

Father in heaven, do not hold our sins up against us, but hold us up against our sins, so that the thought of You each time our soul awakens reminds us not of what we have committed, but of what you have forgiven; not of how we went astray, but of how you have forgiven us. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. (*Sören Kierkegaard*)

The quote Ann wanted was: *do not hold our sins up against us, but hold us up against our sins, so that the thought of You each time our soul awakens reminds us not of what we have committed, but of what you have forgiven; not of how we went astray, but of how you have forgiven us.*

How do all these things tie together, our Gospel lesson, that second reading we just encountered, the parable about the Pharisee and the Tax Collector, Kierkegaard's prayer, and Martin Luther?

I think I'll turn to the document in which Luther made that “Be a sinner and sin boldly” statement. It was a letter to one of his reformist collaborators and the first systematic theologian of the Reformation, Philip Melancthon, in which Luther was supporting marriage of priests (and monks and nuns), citing — correctly, I believe — in opposition to the Roman Church's requirement of priests' chastity, a passage I have always too speedily read through, 1 Timothy 4. The passage, he said, is against mandatory chastity, and thus it would not be — and this is key to why he will later make the statement he does — it would not be *sin* for a

priest to marry. Luther moved on to argue against another historical figure's argument that it was a *sin* to take only one of the elements in the Communion ritual, as do Roman Catholics.

And both of these arguments of what is not sin follow an introduction about the practice we Protestants lack of "Confession" and the priest's dispensing forgiveness, so the topic of sinning is indeed at the heart of this not very long though not perfectly clear letter, which closes with Luther's essentially quoting something he had written a year earlier when he says:

If you are a preacher of mercy, do not preach an imaginary but the true mercy. If the mercy is true, you must therefore bear the true, not an imaginary sin. God does not save those who are only imaginary sinners. Be a sinner, and let your sins be strong, but let your trust in Christ be stronger, and rejoice in Christ who is the victor over sin, death, and the world. We will commit sins while we are here, for this life is not a place where justice resides. We, however, says Peter (2. Peter 3:13), are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth where justice will reign. It suffices that through God's glory we have recognized the Lamb who takes away the sin of the world. No sin can separate us from Him, even if we were to kill or commit adultery thousands of times each day. Do you think such an exalted Lamb paid merely a small price with a meager sacrifice for our sins? Pray hard for you are quite a sinner.

Yes, he says, "Be a sinner" — acknowledge that we are sinners and then we can indeed understand the meaning of God's mercy! But also, "Be a sinner and let your sins be strong, *but let your trust in Christ be stronger*!" "It suffices that through God's glory we have recognized the Lamb who takes away the sin of the world. No sin can separate us from Him, . ." and I will skip what he says next, it is too easily taken out of context, and skip to those closing words, "Do you think such an exalted Lamb paid merely a small price with a meager sacrifice for our sins? Pray hard for you are quite a sinner."
"You are quite a sinner" . . . *we are quite a crew of sinners!*

In our Gospel reading, Jesus makes two points that are important and the purpose for this conversation today: First, he says to the Pharisee in whose home he was, that: "*But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little.*" And I want to turn that idea around in the way Kierkegaard does and interpret it as, "If we do not realize how much we have been forgiven, we are not likely to feel adequately grateful and appreciative of what God has done for us through Christ."

Knowing we are sinners — knowing we are imperfect, knowing we fail to follow God's law, helps us to know the magnitude of love God has for us, because, Jesus says, those sins are forgiven!

And the second thing Jesus says, which was reflected in our reading from the highly important book of Galatians, important for its role in Christian understanding, is when Jesus said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace."

So, Luther is perhaps not *misquoted*, but is *misunderstood* when people use his, “Sin boldly”: we are not engaged in *competitive sinning*. Were it not for the grave danger of engaging in *competitive self-righteousness* by doing so — other than in silent confession, which I would encourage, — were it not for the grave danger of engaging in competitive self-righteousness by doing so, I would say that we should be engaged in *competitive confessing*.

Except that still has it wrong. *Competitive sinning*? No; *competitive confessing*? Only if done silently, such that no one knows how much and what you are confessing, which means it cannot be “*competitive*.”

Competitive praying? Again, I think the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector shows the danger in that.

Competitive forgiving sounds very Christian on the one hand, and might please both Luther and Kierkegaard, but it, too, poses the risk of self-righteousness, so forgive without limit, but tell only the ones forgiven.

So let me try one more possibility: *Competitive gratitude, competitive gratefulness*. I like the sound; maybe that is the sport for us. . . Except that if there is such a sport, I win! I win at gratitude to God — except that I wish everyone of you could beat me at that, that everyone of you could be at least as grateful to God as am I.

I guess gratitude and gratefulness is to be neither competitive nor a sport, it correctly focuses us on the essence of the message of God’s love and Christ’s mercy that we need to absorb — and then to carry to the world. The *amazing grace* that can only be fully realized, when we realize that *it is grace* and not our due is what saves us from our own failures, and that same *amazing grace* will save everyone who understand that Jesus came for him or her.

No; gratefulness is not competitive, but if *competitive gratefulness* can assist in helping others to know him, let’s be one big team of world champions.

Amen.