I love this parable. It is perfect for the times. There you have the Pharisee listing off his accomplishments, I did this and I did that, all the while insulting the other person in the room. It is just like a presidential debate. Isn’t it? Honestly, who here can’t wait for the presidential election to be over? It is terrible. And it is always the same every four years. Each candidate gets up there and talks about how great they are and how bad the other person is. “Under my plan, everything is free and your children will not get acne. Under my opponent’s plan, everyone’s house will be burnt to the ground….and that is just wrong.” (Apologies to Darrell Hammond©) I mean, the presidential debates feel like the parable we have this weekend. You couldn’t ask for a better reading two weeks before an election.

What I like to do when I watch a presidential debate is turn it into a little game where I count how many times a seven deadly sin gets referenced. You remember the seven deadlies right? The list begins with wrath (check, a lot of that this election cycle), pride (check again), even lust gets referenced (in a presidential debate, really?), and then there is greed, envy, sloth, and gluttony of course. When I watch the debates I honestly wonder to myself, how can anyone who is so full of themselves be a public servant? And then I remind myself that I can’t blame them personally, it’s also their speech writers, campaign managers, focus groups that tell them want we want to hear (which is a sad commentary) but it does boggle my mind.

And we can all be guilty at times of puffing ourselves up while tearing someone else down. It happens all the time in a lot of workplaces; “I am a better employee than so and so and why haven’t they fired that bozo yet?” Happens all the time in the playgrounds at school where a unique kid can get scapegoated by the “cool kids”. Even in the family we can compare ourselves by puffing ourselves up while tearing someone else down. And, of course, we see scapegoating at its worst during every election year, “vote for me because my opponent is the antichrist.” Right?

And if you have been listening carefully, you have not heard nor will you hear from me who to vote for (That would not only be illegal for me to do that but it would also be inappropriate, so please don’t corner me after mass with why you are supporting one of the candidates over the others because I really don’t care, honestly). I do encourage everyone however to vote, we need to vote, I care about that, understanding that when it comes to electing people to public office, please follow your informed conscience even if this mean picking the lesser evil, after a glass of wine or two.
What would be a good way to inform our conscience this election year? Instead of fixating on the seven deadly sins, let’s consider looking for the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit in people. Let’s do that. This list begins with wisdom (wisdom gives us the values that are important to God that inform our actions), and continues with understanding (especially when it comes to others and the times we live in), counsel (which could also be called prudence which helps us prioritize), fortitude (to do the right thing even when it is hard), knowledge (it is hard to be wise, or have understanding if we don’t have or know how to seek the information and the data we need), the list wraps up with piety (which is the desire to please God) and finally fear of the Lord (which is the awe and respect we have for God which desires not to offend him). And then, make your vote and good luck to us all. May God watch over our country! And, thank you for putting up with my rant today. Moving on!

Thankfully, the Gospel reading also has relevance beyond an election year and has a lot to say about how we conduct ourselves as Christians, at home, at work or school, or in the community. Jesus tells us today “Whoever exalts himself will be humbled and whoever humbles himself will be exalted”. Here is what I make of this. We talked earlier about how we have this habit of lifting ourselves up while tearing other people down. My take is that over time, this will always eventually lead to disaster.

And I think we all know the following is true: Do you want a sure fire way to destroy your relationships over time? Puff yourself up everywhere you go. I guarantee you that if you do this enough no one will want to be near you. If you puff yourself up you will be humbled. In time, you will lose your family, your friends, and your job. Even God won’t want to be near you, although maybe you could run for president. On the other hand, if you want a sure fire way to win friends and influence people, be interested in other people more than yourself, let your actions speak for themselves, see the good in other people and forever seek ways to better yourself, walking humbly with the Lord. Everyone wants to be near people like that, especially God. Get it?

And we don’t have to look farther than Jesus for an example of what humility looks like. Jesus didn’t need to be born in a temple, a manger will do. Jesus was just as divine on Palm Sunday, as he was on Good Friday as he was on Easter Sunday. The size of his money bag or the latest opinion polls didn’t alter the truth of who he was and what he was about. Jesus was grounded in his mission not opinion polls. His mission wasn’t about himself but about care and concern of everybody else. In our Gospel reading, Jesus is essentially telling us to therefore stop scapegoating each other. He tells us this all the while being willing to be the scapegoat for us and the sake of our salvation. There he is, on the cross for us. There is no greater sign of God’s love for us. Jesus therefore challenges us to be more loving and merciful to the people in our lives. And this also means the difficult people in our lives because Jesus wants to save them too, even those running for office. I mean that sincerely.
And so we can ask ourselves this week, who am I in the Gospel story? Who am I in this story? Am I more like the Pharisee who puffs himself up too much in the presence of God and others? Do I like to lift myself up while tearing other people down? If so, I should remember the parable today because this didn’t work out so well for the Pharisee. Am I more like the tax collector who understands that he is imperfect and a sinner and yet whose prayers are heard because he is humble? At the end of the day, God prefers a contrite heart, doesn’t he?

You see, my friends, if God loves us and wants to have an honest relationship with us, it is critically important that we are honest with ourselves and more forgiving of others. Humility requires us to take an objective, grounded look at how we are succeeding in life and how we are failing. We are invited to have an honest appraisal of ourselves in our relationships with God, family, neighbors, and co-workers. Humility requires that we celebrate the good and to take steps to remedy the not so good in our own lives and the world around us. The Pharisee in Jesus’ parable failed to do this. The hated tax collector succeeded, which is why his prayers were answered. The Gospel invites us to consider, if we want to become more like God, we are invited to be humble with God and kinder to the people around us, “for whoever exalts himself will be humbled and whoever humbles himself will be exalted”. Amen? Amen!